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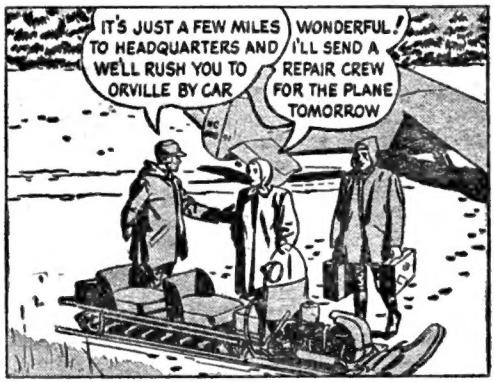
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ALL STORIES NEW **NO REPRINTS**

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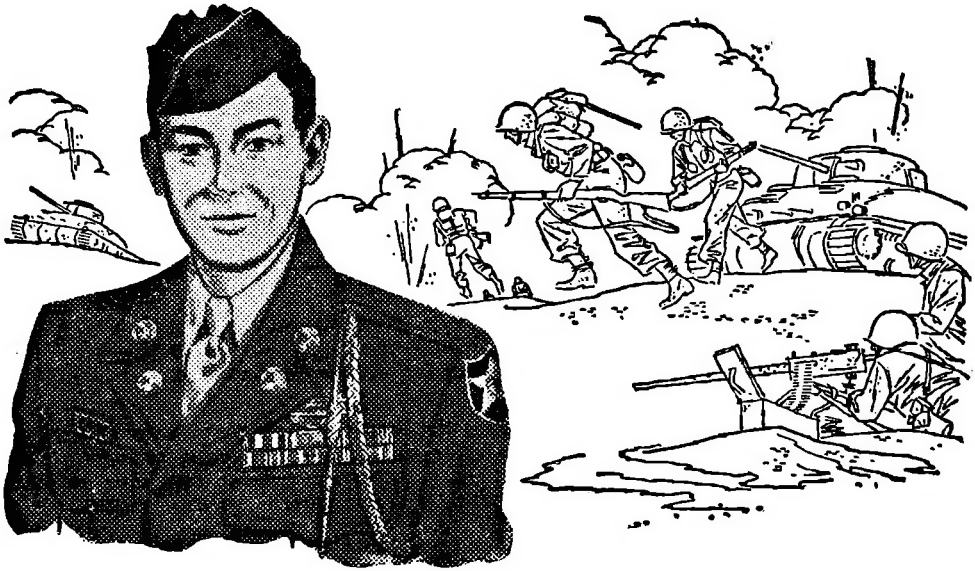

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IN THE SADDLE

TIMES had been tough in Nevada since the Comstock diggings petered out. A third of the state's population had left for richer, if not greener, pastures. Then Jim Butler's burro found Tonopah and Nevada was saved till such time as Reno and Las Vegas could take care of the revenue through legalized games of chance.

Tonopah was booming. Saloons were a dime a dozen, and so were the honkytonks. Mines came a little higher; the worse the mine, the dearer it came.

In the meantime ore worth eight hundred dollars a ton was being brought to the surface and better stuff was still below. Shafts were going down night and day. It was all very confusing. Especially to a newcomer; bewildering *and* disappointing. All the ground worth staking was staked and any johnny-come-lately was out of luck. Or was he? That depended upon the man. If he was good, he still had a chance.

Jack Stewart was good. Moreover, he knew it. Though still a young man, he had done enough prospecting and roaming around Nevada to know that all riches aren't gotten by the pick and the sweat of the brow. What lies back of the brow is often as lucrative as the stuff underfoot.

So when Jack Stewart came to Tonopah, several hops and jumps and a few thousand first-comers too late, he didn't chase way to hell-and-gone into the unstaked outskirts to monument a jackrabbit pasture. Nope, he sat down and started figuring. When he got done figuring, he started looking around. And, yes, sir, right there in the middle of the maddest of the bedlam he found what he hoped for—a brain bonanza!

In no time at all, Jack was busy putting up his location notice. A man came by, stopped, looked and found something to say.

"Say, young feller, what the hell's the big idea? Whatcha think yo're doin'?"

"Stakin' my claim," Jack replied calmly.

"Stakin' your claim, hell! That ground's all took up, mister."

"Not this piece," Jack said. "Look for yourself, friend. See them monuments? Just lay your peepers along 'em and you'll see that there's a slice of ground between these claims that ain't included in either one."

Jack was right. An unclaimed piece of real estate sat wedged between the two claims. These happened to belong to one and the same company. Jack's staking the wedge was like a stranger fencing a dividing strip across your living room.

The next morning the outfit's super sought Jack. "You the feller what staked that fraction of ground between our claims?"

"Yep," Jack nodded. "That's me."

"How much you want for it?"

"Oh," Jack drawled, "thirty thousand?"

"Thirty thousand!"

The superintendent got blue in the face. "You crazy?" he yelled. "That strip of ground isn't big enough for a gopher to sink a shaft in. Not to mention no ore."

"Wa'al," drawled Jack, "it may not have much ore in it, like you say, though that's open to dispute. But it sure as hell's got a lot of no trespassing on it."

The super groaned. "It isn't worth but a fraction of what you ask. And you know it!"

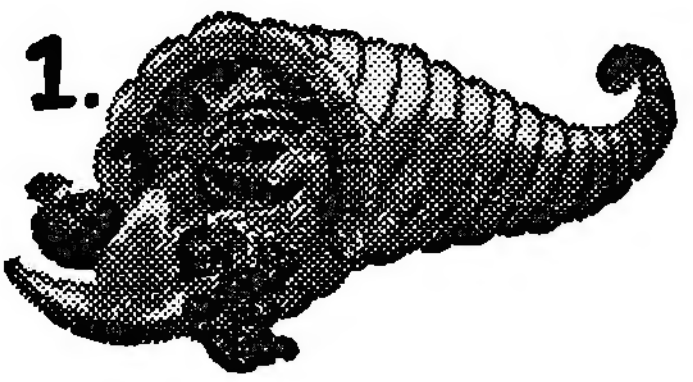
"How much of a fraction?" Jack asked.

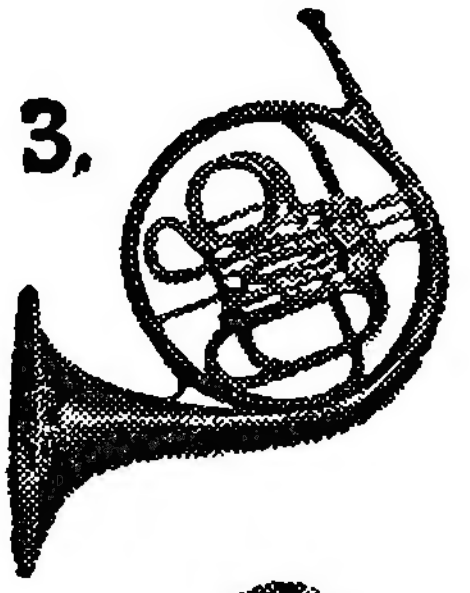
"One thirtieth! We'll give a thousand."

Jack sucked through his teeth. "I see," he nodded. "Wa'al, no man ever said of me I'd gum up a deal for a few fractions, one way or another. Okay, mister."

After that incident, Jack Stewart was a man to be pointed out and to be talked about in Tonopah. It also earned him a nickname. Fraction Jack Stewart.

—*Roy Vandergoot.*





Match up the people and the horns

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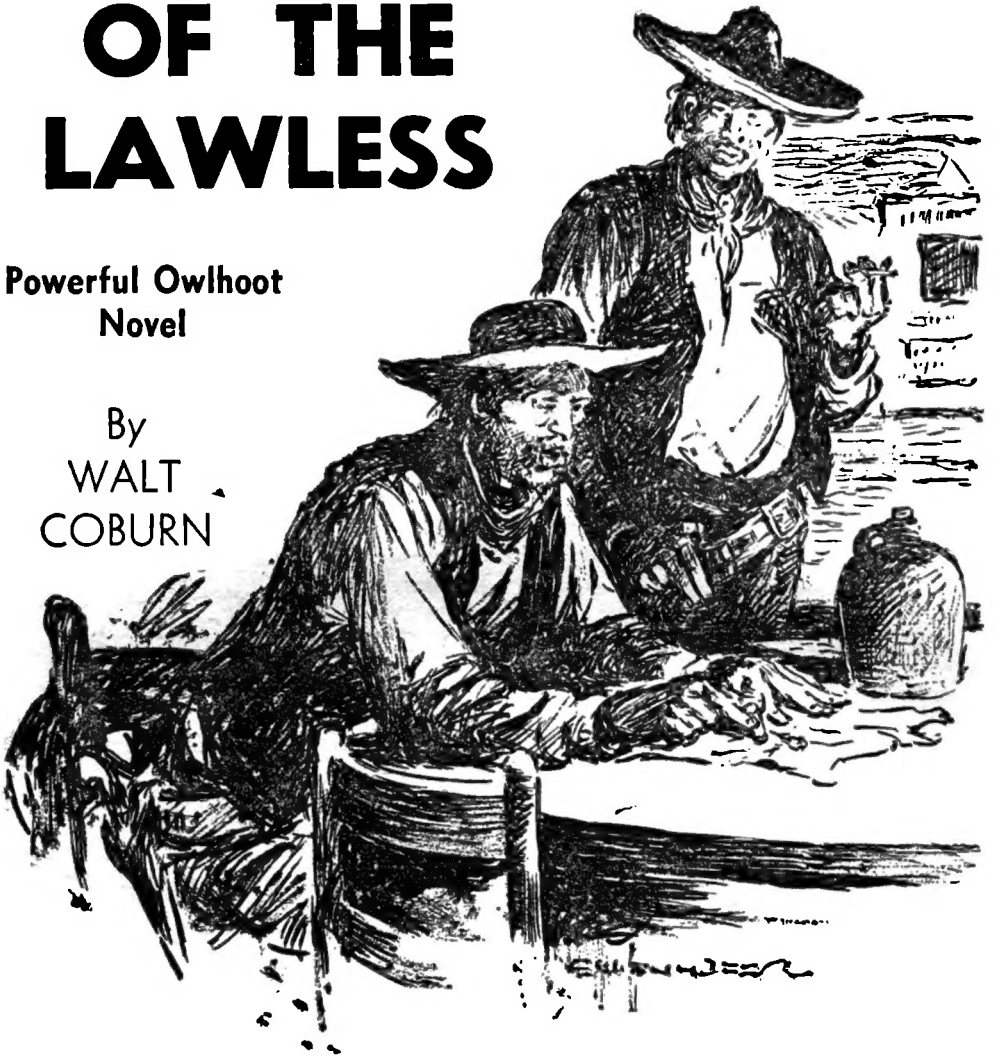
LAW OF THE LAWLESS

Powerful Owlhoot Novel

By WALT COBURN



Outlaw Lon Carroll, with ten thousand bounty riding on his head, waited only for Winter's passing to claim his cached-out stake and make tracks for the far-off Argentine. But then, to his hideout at Hole-in-the-Wall, came the ghost of Carroll's past in the form of a red-bearded killer, and Carroll got to wondering if he should toss his Argentine stake, his liberty and his life down the nearest rat-hole—to make a little girl's Christmas prayer come true!

Then, in the light of the lantern, Patrick mapped out their trail.

CHAPTER ONE

Lesson for Henyard Outlaws

OUTLAW LON CARROLL had made his South America stake so he decided to winter at Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch. "I got a hunch," he said, "that Henry DuBois is a-layin' for me somewheres along my trail out."

Henry DuBois was one of the shrewdest, most cold-blooded range detectives ever to wear a law badge.

Carroll was no man's coward. But he was the last of the old Powder River Gang of train and bank robbers and he had survived only because he had been smart enough, so far, to elude Dubois traps.

"Old Man Afraid of his Horses," grinned Red Patrick.

It was a sort of taunting challenge the big, red-headed Patrick put out. Patrick had ridden up the outlaw trail from Robbers' Roost to cool off, he said, and organize a bank robber outfit. He still walked with a limp from the .30-30 slug he'd picked up in a running fight with a New Mexico law posse.

"All guts." Carroll grinned back at Patrick. "No brains inside that sorrel head of yourn. Where you made your mistake was not stayin' with that forty-a-month job you had in Arizona, punchin' cows."

"Forty a month, hell! I owned my own iron. But that's all I had left after four straight years of drought. And I had the missus and kid to look after. . . ."

Red Patrick was a little drunk. His bloodshot eyes looked mean in the lantern

light of the log bunkhouse. There was a bitter twist to his mouth.

"You was doin' a good job a-lookin' after the missus and kid," Carroll tried to josh him out of that ugly mood, "when I first met up with you, in jail at Roswell."

Red Patrick reached for the jug, his grin widening. He said, "And you're such a quiet feller. Easy goin'. Tow-headed, and them blue eyes innocent as a baby's. Neither big ner tall. Just another common forty-a-month cowhand ridin' the grubline. Paint the town an' git throwed in jail to sober up and the Law don't never suspect it's got the notorious Lon Carroll locked up."

Patrick tilted the jug, drank and passed it to another man. His grin took in the four outlaws in the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch bunkhouse. Red Patrick continued:

"The big, bulldozin' deputy is watchin' me, boys, when he fetches in our supper to his snake tank, where there's me'n this tow-headed thing and a few drunks. I'm big as a skinned mule an' it taken some manhandlin' to throw me into that Roswell dally house. He's payin' no attention whatever when Lon lands on his back. Kerwham! Before them drunks knows what it's all about, that deputy jailer is out cold. This ol' tow-headed cowboy is standin' straddle of him. He's got the jailer's keys and six-shooter, and he's as easy-goin' as a parson.

"'I'm a-leavin' here,' says he. 'Anybody comin' along? Rattle your hocks, then. I'm lockin' up for the night.'

"I went along," Red Patrick chuckled. "And it wasn't till a week later, when we git to Robbers' Roost where they call him by name, that I know I bin travelin' with the notorious Lon Carroll, ramrod of the Powder River Gang up in Wyoming."

Then Patrick's grin flattened, bitterness came back to his voice and his eyes were cold, green slivers in the lantern light.

"Carroll wouldn't let me throw in with his Powder River Gang. Said he was full-handed. Mebbyso he figgered Patrick wasn't tough enough to take along."

Carroll lazed on the tarp-covered round-up bed he had spread on one of the bunks. He was plaiting a rawhide quirt. Tow-headed, five feet nine, with heavy shoulders that wedged down to a flat belly and lean flanks, he looked younger than his thirty years. His eyes were wary now as they watched Red Patrick. There was no telling what a man like Red might do when the rotgut booze took hold.

PATRICK was one gent who had no business riding the outlaw trail. He was tough enough. No doubting that. But he talked too much when he got drunk, for one thing. And you couldn't count on him in a tight. Patrick worked on booze. Booze either slowed a man down like tanglefoot or made him too quick-triggered. Red had guts. But he lacked the brains required when each man in the gang had his part of the job to do, and no more. Unless something went wrong. Then a man had to be mighty quick-witted and swift-moving. He had to be cold sober and able to handle anything that came his way in a tight. Mainly he had to hold his fire. Shoot a bank cashier or train crew man and it's written against you in the law book—written in blood. Patrick had that kind of record right now. He had organized his own gang at Robbers' Roost, and the result had netted him not a dollar. Patrick's gang had bungled each job they tackled. They'd had to shoot their way back to Robbers' Roost. Some had been captured and sent to the pen, others killed.

Patrick had licked his wounds there at Robbers' Roost till they were healed, then drifted up to Brown's Hole. From Brown's Hole he had moved on north to the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch, alone. He was poisoned by bitterness. Patrick wanted to get himself another tough outlaw outfit and grab himself a big stake.

Carroll hadn't seen Patrick for two years. Since the time he had refused to take the renegade into his hand-picked Powder River outfit. Red had taken the refusal like a bitter dose of medicine; the taste was still wormwood and gall mixed with forty rod. Carroll had never killed a man; he hoped he wouldn't be crowded into shooting Patrick now.

"It never was a question of your bein' tough enough, Red," Carroll said quietly. "I told you my reasons. Let's forget it. It's water under the bridge."

"Easy enough for you to lay back an'

roundside," Patrick said. "You got yourn. And what I mean it's all yourn. There was five of you gents in your gang. You was the ramrod and you got your big cut. Then your gang split up. And one by one DuBois cut 'em down where he found 'em. But I've heard it told that all that range detective ever got off them dead carcasses was chicken feed. The gang pooled it all in one big cache for their South America stake. Now them other four is dead. And it's all yourn. You kin lay back an' roundside all winter, makin' rawhide quirts and ropes. You got yourn made. Lon Carroll has got 'er made. . . ."

Carroll's hands were busy plaiting the rawhide strands. His were strong, muscled, weathered hands. When he pulled the strands the knuckles showed white. That was the only indication of the tenseness within him. But he was ready to drop the half-finished quirt and grab the six-shooter from under his pillow.

"I made you a proposition once, Red," he said softly. "It still goes. Sober up and we'll auger it over."

"I give you your answer then, didn't I?" Patrick snarled. "And it goes double, right now. I don't want a dollar's worth of your damn charity, mister."

Carrol reached up to where a soiled towel hung from the top bunk. He threw it square into the renegade's red-whiskered face. The towel flapped over his face like a hood as he clawed for the holstered gun on his thigh.

Carroll quit the bunk, fast, his gun in his hand. He swung the barrel down across Patrick's wrist with a short, chopping blow. The six Patrick had drawn slid from his hand and clattered to the pine board floor.

Patrick yanked the towel from his face. Pain twisted his mouth. He looked into the muzzle of Carroll's six.

"You bin bellyachin' enough, Red!" Carroll snapped. "You got your cryin' towel. Go off somewheres till you're done feelin' so damn' sorry for yourself."

"You busted my wrist," Patrick said dazedly.

Patrick towered over Carroll, but somehow Lon seemed the bigger man of the two. Even when he shoved his six-shooter into the waistband of his overalls.

"I figgered," he grinned flatly, "it was better than gut-shootin' you, Red."

Red worked his fingers slowly, painfully.

"They ain't busted," Carroll said, and picked up the six-shooter from the floor. He held it loosely in his hand, his puckered blue eyes watching Patrick. After a moment he flipped the gun around in his hand and held it by the barrel, towards the bigger man.

"We started out friends, Red," he said quietly. "Let's try to keep it that-away."

Red Patrick nodded. He took the gun in his left hand. It was a clumsy job getting the iron back into its holster. He was cussing into his red whiskers. Perhaps it was the pain. But most likely it was something deeper inside and he was covering up something he felt ashamed of. Because he was grinning by the time he got the gun into the holster.

"THAT'S what I mean, boys," Patrick said. "There that tow-headed thing was. Flat on his back braidin' a damnfool rawhide quirt. Next thing I know he's throwed a towel in my face and knocked a gun outa my hand. Without never turnin' a hair."

Patrick reached for the jug with his left hand. "That's why he's got his South America stake, gents. And by the same reasons, that's why I'm ridin' the grubline, nary a dollar richer than I was when I kissed my good wife and young 'un goodbye till I could come back to 'em loaded down with big foldin' money."

Red Patrick tilted the jug up over his arm, twisted his whiskered mouth around and drank. Then he swung the jug down onto the big, round-topped poker table.

"You knew the proposition Carroll made me when he told me I wasn't fit to take along with his gang?" His voice was too loud now—and none too steady.

"You're runnin' off at the head, Red," Carroll said softly.

"Yeah. But I'm still a-talkin'. And I want these two-bit gentle Annies to hear it. . . ."

There was no stopping his talking, unless Carroll knocked him in the head with a gun barrel. And Lon had no stomach for it. He turned and sat on the edge

of his bunk and reached for tobacco and cigarette papers.

"Carroll," Patrick said, "tossed me a gunny sack that had more stolen money in it than you henyard outlaws will ever see. He told me to take it along and go back to my Arizona ranch. Back to the missus and young 'un. That I didn't have what it takes to ride the outlaw trail. That was his proposition. You heard him say it still goes—and you heard me tell him to go to hell!"

Red Patrick's voice choked in his throat. He picked up the soiled towel. "He throwed me a cryin' towel—by the hell it fits the hand of Red Patrick better than a gun, don't it?"

Those green eyes were wet with tears. He was dangerous now. Those renegades in the Hole-in-the-Wall bunkhouse were getting a look at something they should never see. It made them uneasy. Nobody wanted to watch this. But Patrick made them look.

"Carroll called it," Patrick rasped. "I'm a sorry damned picture! I gathered me a bunch of cowhands and we got drunk and I led 'em into trouble. Cowpunchers I'd worked with. Forty-a-month cowhands. Outlaws, hell! A pack of ol' country boys. And they got the hell shot outa them all. Yeah. A couple or three of 'em died with their boots on. Two got picked up and sent to the pen, cursin' Red Patrick that got 'em into it. The others that got away with their hides cussed me out and quit me. They pulled out for a new range to change their names and go back to punchin' cows. That's what happened to me and my sorry outlaw outfit.

"So take a good look at big, tough Red Patrick, the outlaw. The big, red-muzzled, drunken sorry hound. Take a good look, gents. It's the last look you'll git of me alive!"

Patrick's left hand dipped into the pocket of his overalls. Palming a double-barreled .44 derringer, he shoved the muzzle into his mouth.

Carroll quit the edge of his bunk as though he had springs in both legs. He landed on the big man's back. The twin derringer barrels spat jets of fire and the soft-nosed .44 slugs thudded into the log wall. The big man went down, Carroll on top of him.

CHAPTER TWO

"They Don't Know You in Montana."

LON CARROLL'S clean-shaved, weathered face was white. His fists pounded the red-whiskered face with short, trip-hammer blows. Blood spurted. Grunts came from the groggy Patrick. It was only when the grunts ceased and the renegade's head lobbed sluggishly under his punches that Carroll let up. He staggered to his feet like a drunken man, sweat pouring down his face. He was blowing hard as he stood back and stared down at the big, motionless hulk.

"You big, gutless, sorry damned fool!" he grated.

It was only on rare occasions that Carroll drank whiskey. But now he walked over to the poker table and picked up the jug. His hands were shaking so that the neck of the jug rattled against his teeth. He gulped down the raw whiskey, put the jug back on the table and walked over to the bench near the door where there was a bucket of water, a dipper and a battered tin wash basin. He fetched the bucket back and threw the water into Patrick's face. Patrick groaned. The bloodshot eyes blinked open.

"Stand up on your two laigs, you yellow dog!" Carroll gritted. "I'm goin' to beat some sense into that skull of yourn. Don't think I'm goin' to all this bother on your account. So far as you're concerned, you coulda blowed them silly brains of yourn to hell an' gone an' nobody here to give a damn. You big loud mouthed gutless tramp! Stand up on your two laigs and show some fight or I'll tromp your guts out."

Patrick rolled over onto his belly, then up onto hands and knees. Blood seeped from his smashed nose and mouth. He began retching.

"Looks like he's had all he kin take, Lon," one of the renegades said. "By the time he gits done cleanin' up that mess, he'll be sober."

"Then put him on the Injun list," Carroll said. "If he reaches for that jug, gang up on him."

Carroll took the empty water bucket outside. He was gone quite a while. He was still out there in the dark, squatted

on his hunkers with a pail of water beside him, when the bunkhouse door opened.

From under his slanted hatbrim he saw Red Patrick framed in the doorway. Patrick lurched out and pulled the door shut behind him.

Carroll squatted there in the moonlight without moving, the pail of water beside him. He waited until the big man came up and stood there, weaving a little. Then he took the dipper handle and told Patrick to sit down.

"Take a drink of this, Red. It's what you're workin' on from now on."

"It taken all the guts I had," Patrick mumbled, "to work myself into the notion. I'll never git up enough guts to tackle it a second time. Why the hell didn't you let me go through with it?"

"How long since you seen your wife and young 'un, Red?" Carroll spoke quietly. As if it were some casual question.

"Not since I left 'em at that place of mine in Arizona."

"And that'll be four years ago, comin' Christmas."

"How'd you know? I never got drunk enough to tell you that."

"There'd bin a drought, all right. Every cow outfit in Arizona felt it. Cricks dried up and the feed dried up and some places the cattle was livin' on cholla cactus and the browse they could find in the mountain brush. Pore, weak cattle dyin' off. But them Mexican cattle from down in Sonora is hard to kill. There was a handful of 'em left when the rains come. It rained on Christmas Day. Commenced early in the mornin' and it rained all day. And it kept on a-rainin', off and on, till the warm weather fetched the grass.

"It was the kind of a year them Arizona cowmen call a 'filaree Spring', when that filaree weed grows thick as a carpet and puts the taller on cattle like nothin' else does in the way of feed. And the rains put the cowman back on his feet. The feed and water was plentiful. All a border cowman like Red Patrick had to do was hire hisself a few border-jumper cowhands and slip down into Sonora like he'd done before and steal hisself some more of them Mexican cattle."

"What the hell you drivin' at, mister?" Red Patrick stood in the moonlight, towering over the squatting Carroll. His voice had a croaking sound.

"Gittin' back to that day it rained," Carroll went on. "Christmas Day. When the prayers of the wimminfolks was answered and God sent rain to break the drought. They tell of one old cowman who walked out an' stood bareheaded in the rain till he was soaked to the hide, and when somebody told him he'd ketch his death of dampness he said it'd be worth it."

LON CARROLL looked up at the renegade and his voice cut like a rawhide quirt.

"You didn't even git your shirt damp that Christmas Day it rained. You was sittin' in a poker game at Nogales. Gamblin' off the money your good wife had saved up and handed over to you. It wasn't much. Mebbyso a hundred bucks. But it was enough to buy grub and shoes and what clothin' was needed for her and the young 'un. And to buy a few little toys for Christmas presents and some trimmin's for the li'l' ol' pine tree she was decoratin' for a Christmas tree for the young 'un. The little young 'un that was crippled because you stumbled over her where she was playin' on the floor with a hound pup. It was kinda dark in the kitchen and you mistaken the kid for the pup, and kicked her, and it left her crippled. . . ."

Croaking, ugly sounds came from Patrick's blood-matted, whiskered mouth.

Lon Carroll's quiet voice went on without mercy. He squatted beside the water pail, looking up from under his hatbrim.

"Christmas meant an awful lot to that little crippled girl. She said her prayers on Christmas Eve, and like most kids that still believe in Santy Claus she got Santy and Christ, Whose birthday it was, kinda mixed up. She prayed to God for rain when she knelt with her mother beside the bed. And she tacked on a list of presents she wanted Santy to fetch her. And she tied up her little prayer with an Amen, and her mother tucked her into bed."

"Damn you!" Patrick's voice was a whisper. "Damn you to hell, you tow-headed dog!"

"You lost your pitiful li'l' ol' savin's,"

Carroll went on relentlessly, "to them Nogales tinhorns. Then Patrick come back to claim it with a gun. He shot two of 'em and one of 'em died. He had to make a runnin' fight of it to git away. He didn't dast go back to his ranch. So he gathered a few of his border-jumper cowhands and headed into New Mexico, bound for Robbers' Roost, to ride the outlaw trail. You got drunk along the way and was throwed in jail at Roswell. Your border-jumpers quit you and rode on, scared to be ketched with you because you'd killed a gamblin' man at Nogales and was wanted for murder. You picked up your border-jumpers again at Robbers' Roost. A coyote pack. A drunken coyote pack. Scattered, now, killed off or penned up where they belong."

Lon Carroll stood up. He held the filled dipper by its long handle. "You ain't bin back there since, have you, Red?"

"Damn you to hell! When I swallered that pistol . . . knowin' what you know, what made you stop me from doin' the only thing I got left to do? A thing like me's better off dead."

"No argument about that, so far as I'm concerned," said Lon Carroll. "But it beats hell how a good woman kin stay fooled."

"What the hell you drivin' at—What you holdin' out on me?"

"THAT Christmas rain done more good than fillin' the water holes," Carroll said. "It blotted out the tracks me'n my Powder River Gang left when we held up the train that Christmas Eve, when we scattered and drifted. I headed for the Mexican border. Stopped for a change of horses at a little ranch on the Arizona side of the line, where there was a little lady and a crippled child about six. I had supper with her and the young 'un. That night I rode to Nogales an' I taken that Santy Claus list with me. Next day was Christmas Day. I spent it there with that lady and the little crippled girl. That tree was decorated, and there was presents wrapped in red and green paper, and there was roast turkey and apple pie and candy. Striped peppermint stick candy. It was the first real Christmas I'd had since I was a button of a kid. It turned cold and the rain turned to snow. So it was a white Christmas in Arizona."

"Damn you . . . damn you to hell . . ." Patrick sounded as though he was choking to death.

"The little young 'un . . . all big, dark eyes and curly red hair . . . So brim full of happiness it made a man choke up inside. Her mother told her it was the storm kept her daddy from gettin' back home. But her daddy has sent Santy Claus instead. When she got ready for bed she had to say her prayers and nothin' would do I had to kneel down there with her and her mother and join' in. I'd forgot there was a prayer in the world. . . .

" 'God bless and protect Daddy Red and bring him back home.' "

Carroll stared at Patrick there in the moonlight and there was no mercy in his eyes.

"I said Amen to that prayer." His voice was flat-toned. "Mebbyso that clears up why I didn't let you blow your damned brains out."

He shoved the dipper of water at Patrick.

"Sober up on that stuff," he snapped. "Then hit the trail. You got a wife and young 'un waitin' for you to come home."

Patrick held the dipper in an unsteady hand, spilling the water. Hate glittered in his bloodshot eyes. Suddenly he snarled, "You know damned well I can't go back. There's a bounty on my hide."

"You killed a tinhorn gambler on the Mexican side of the line at Nogales. The other tinhorn got well and was stabbed to death later by a Mexican. Them would-be hold-up jobs you and your border-jumper coyote pack tried to pull off got nobody shot but your coyotes. The law never figgered Patrick was tough enough to put so much as a dollar's worth of bounty on your hide. Up in Montana they never heard of you."

"Montana?"

"That's where your wife and young 'un live now."

CHAPTER THREE

Feudists' Trail

LON CARROLL knew Patrick hated him. The hatred was like a poison distilled inside his heart and pumped

through his veins. That hatred seeped through his big, raw-boned, six-foot body and stank in the sweat that came from his pores.

Those other outlaws at the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch saw and felt it, without knowing the deep-rooted cause of the hatred.

"It don't look like no man would hate another man for savin' his life," said one. "Red's sobered up now and plumb outa the notion of killin' hisself. Hell, that big jasper likes hisself too much. He's worse sobered up than he was drunk, travelin' on his big, tough shape. Somebody'll have to kill that jasper if he gits much ranker."

Each of them was tough enough in his own right to tackle Patrick. Lon Carroll kept them from ganging up on Red.

"He'll hit the trail before long," Carroll told them.

"What the hell's holdin' him back?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

Patrick had an answer—an answer spiked with a challenge. A challenge none would pick up because they wanted no part of any job ramrodded by Red Patrick.

"There's a bank full of money at Buffalo, Wyoming," Patrick said. "I got me a empty gunnysack I'm aimin' to fill with that big dough, directly I gather me a bunch of hombres that's got the guts to foller Red Patrick. Who amongst you curly wolves with them kinda guts?"

"We wouldn't foller you to the crick for a drink of water, Red," one man gritted, "if our tongues was hangin' out."

"Then I'll hole up here till some of my old gang shows up."

"You told us they was all killed off, Red, or doin' time in the pen somewheres down southwest."

"There's a few left. And they'll be driftin' here to the Hole-in-the-Wall before snow flies. Them renegade sons will foller me to hell!"

"That's where any man will land if he follers you, Red. No gamble about it," they told him.

Lon Carroll had a beef hide soaking in a big wooden tub of water; he was getting it ready to cut into long strands to braid a rawhide reata. Working with rawhide, plaiting it into quirts and reatas gave a man something to do while he was holed up in the outlaw hideaway. He kept the tub with its soaking hide in a far corner of the long log bunkhouse. The beef hide, with the hair taken off, gave off a strong odor. Neither pleasant nor too unsavory once you got used to its odor. And none of them were that finicky.

Only Red Patrick voiced anything in the way of protest. And he did it in a half-joshing, half-sneering way.

"In the big pen, where Henry DuBois aims to throw you," Patrick said, "you'll be makin' horsehair bridles."

"DuBois," Carroll clipped, "don't aim to take me alive. It's my dead hide he's promised to hang on his fence."

"How much bounty on that hide of yourn?" Patrick asked.

"It tallies close to ten thousand dollars right now."

"That's as much as I'd git for my gunnysack," Patrick grinned, "if I held up the Buffalo bank."

"You better be joshin'," an outlaw said. "You shore better be joshin', Big Red, because if you meant ary part of that, we'd hang that big carcass of yourn to a tree limb."

Patrick laughed. The laugh was too loud; it grated against their eardrums. They eyed him coldly, hands near their guns.

Lon Carroll knew Patrick wasn't joshing. The renegade would like nothing better than to deliver his bullet-riddled carcass to the law and collect that ten thousand. Patrick would take every dollar of that blood money to his wife and hand it to her—or, more likely, throw it at her. He'd tell her what kind of money it was and how he'd earned it. That was the kind of hatred Patrick had for Carroll. And for sufficient reason. Even Carroll didn't blame Patrick for that.

It came out when Patrick asked how come his wife and youngster were in Montana and how Carroll knew so much about her whereabouts.

"I LOCATED her there with her youngster," Carroll said. "I moved her away from where she was because it was no place for a lone lady and a crippled child, there on a two-bit border ranch. No close neighbors. Nobody to talk to. No wimminfolks. She wasn't a ranch girl to start with. But she put up with it be-

cause she felt it was her duty as a wife. She put up with you and your renegade border-jumper amigos. And a hell of a life it was. She didn't tell me. But even the Mexicans felt sorry for your family. Mebbyso she loved you once. I reckon she did or she'd never made the mistake of marryin' you. But you damned soon killed what love she had for you. She stayed with you because she was bound to you by marriage. She lived up to her end of a sorry bargain. But you broke every word of that bargain, big, tough mister. Shootin' is too damned easy an out for the likes of you.

"Don't git the notion your wife ever said or hinted she don't love you. She's waitin' to welcome you if ever you show up. You're the father of her child. She married you. She'll stay married to you as long as you're alive. There are few women in this world like that."

"Shut up your damned preachin'. Where is she?"

"I told you. Montana."

"That covers a hell of a big lot of territory. Whereabouts in Montana?"

"I'll take you there."

"The hell you will!" Patrick shouted.

"That's the only way you'll ever find her."

"She's got no money. That border ranch was mortgaged to the hilt. What's she usin' for money to live on?"

"If you had any right to ask that question," Carroll said, "I'd give you the answer."

Patrick's slitted green eyes knifed deep into Lon Carroll. "By the hell," he gritted, "you're stuck on my wife!"

"That's about the way a thing like you would word it," Carroll said softly. "I love the woman who is married to you. Who is your wife only by name. She don't know that. As long as you're alive she'll never know it from me. You don't know, big mister, how much it would mean to me if I could take that little lady the news that you were dead, and that she was free."

"That don't make sense. You kept me from killin' myself when I was too locoed drunk to git the job done. Why?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Patrick turned and stumbled away, as though still drunk. But it had not been booze that weighted his gait or blinded his eyes. It had been something akin to shame. The memory of a crippled child. The haunting memory of a child's prayer to God to bring back her daddy. Other prayers said with child's faith to make well once more the crippled limbs maimed by her drunken father. . . .

There was shame in Red Patrick. But shame absorbed quickly in the poison of hatred. Hatred that now took in his wife and child along with Lon Carroll.

The Hole-in-the-Wall outlaws talked it over—and brought their verdict to Lon Carroll.

"The Hole-in-the-Wall is too cramped, Lon, to hold us and Patrick. He's got to go."

Carroll had expected something like this. He asked one man to help him lug the big wooden tub with the soaking rawhide outside. There they dumped the water out. He hung the sodden hide on the pole corral. They could cut it into wide strips and use the strips to wrap the corral poles to the upright posts.

"I'm goin' along," he told them, "with Patrick. I'll tell him he's wore out his welcome at Hole-in-the-Wall. We'll pull out tomorrow mornin' at sunrise."

CHAPTER FOUR

Killers from the Border

FOUR men rode up to the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch that evening. Only Patrick gave them any kind of welcome. With his thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt he stood spread-legged, teeth bared in a grin.

"About time you showed up!" Patrick hailed the riders. "Long time no see, you damned curly wolves!"

The four renegades were glad to see Patrick. Mainly because they were strangers here, far north of the Mexican border and none too certain of welcome at Hole-in-the-Wall.

"You damn Big Red! Bigger'n louder'n ever! We had hell a-gittin' organized but we made 'er!"

They were all a little drunk and each of them had a jug slung from his saddle horn by a hogging string. They said they figgered they'd be more welcome if they

fetched along a little likker to swill up.

"Likker or no likker," bellowed Patrick, "you curly wolves is plenty welcome. It's election time here at Hole-in-the-Wall. I need your votes."

Red Patrick hadn't been allowed so much as one drink from the bunkhouse jug that was kept re-filled by one man whose job was to contact the nearest whiskey peddler. Red had been on the Injun list.

Now he grabbed the nearest of the four proffered jugs, pulled the cork with his big yellow teeth, spat the cork on the ground and drank.

"What you runnin' for, Big Red? Dawg ketcher?"

"Nary office. There's four fellers here besides Outlaw Lon Carroll. They held kangaroo court on me. Voted to run me outa the Hole-in-the-Wall. Tonight we'll just throw in our votes agin' theirn. Deadlock it. You curly wolves figger on stayin' here, you better back my play. Tell 'em that down on the Mexican border I'm Big Red Patrick, the wolf that's leader of you four curly wolves. And when the sign is right, by the hell, I'm takin' you along. There's a bank full of big money at the cowtown of Buffalo. And we're gettin' it. Now step down an' turn loose. The Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch is all ourn."

Over at the bunkhouse Lon told his four men to take it easy; let Red Patrick and his curly wolves howl a while. As long as they took it out in howling no harm was done. He had a hunch Patrick wasn't just bragging big about holding up the Buffalo bank. The renegade had talked so much about it he'd have to go through with the deal.

"He's got 'er made, boys, to pull off that bank hold-up," Carroll said. "And when you come right down to it, Patrick has the guts to tackle what he's bragged about doin'. And them four border-jumpers he's takin' along for company have all heard the owl hoot. It's nobody's Sunday school picnic playin' gun tag with the law down along the Mexican border, where there's the United States law and the Mexican law to dodge. I don't know them gents, only by their tough reps. They run guns to the rebels durin' the Mexican revolutions. And between revolutions they steal Mexican cattle and fetch 'em up acrost the line when the moon is right. Patrick and his gang has dodged their share of bullets and killed their share of men. They're all just about as tough as they look."

The new arrivals were tough—and cautious. Unsure of themselves because they were a long way north of their stomping ground.

"Pay no attention to Big Red," said one of the four when Patrick herded them ahead of him into the bunkhouse. "Anybody knows him don't let his paw and beller bother 'em. We're strangers here in a strange land."

The speaker was a short, stocky man with a pockmarked skin and pale, gray eyes. He was part Mexican and tough as a boot. "I'm called Mex," he said, and let the other three make their own introductions.

None of them claimed a name. They had picked their own nicknames. Slim. Heavy. Bowlegs. Nicknames that fitted them.

Lon Carroll was the only real outlaw among them all. The others were no more than cattle rustlers or horse-thieves laying over a while at Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch, where any man on the dodge was welcome—unless he was on the blacklist for some violation of the unwritten laws that governed the men who rode the outlaw trail.

"Red Patrick," Carroll said, "knows where he stands here. You gents are welcome as long as you don't try smokin' up the place. Hole-in-the-Wall belongs to nobody. Any man on the dodge kin hole up here. You know what's right and what ain't. Make yourselves at home."

"That's the famous Carroll just run off at the head!" Patrick was feeling his whiskey. "You don't need to believe what you heard about Carroll sellin' out his Powder River Gang one at a time to Henry DuBois, the bounty hunter. And DuBois splittin' the bounty money with Carroll on each one of the gang he killed off."

NOBODY cracked a grin. Patrick's four border-jumpers were eyeing their ramrod uneasily. Patrick's whiskered grin twisted.

"That ain't no way to talk, Big Red," said the pockmarked Mex. "Even if you're just hoorawin'."

"You ever see ten thousand dollars, Mex?" Patrick went on, his voice rasping. "All in one hunk? You four curly wolves never seen ten thousand bucks in your lives. Well, take a good look at the notorious Lon Carroll. There's ten thousand dollars on that scalp of his. All a man has to do is sink one li'l ol' hunk of lead in the right place. One ca'tridge that costs you one copper penny. And when you hit that target she rings the bell to the tune of ten thousand dollars worth of dead outlaw meat laid down at the nearest law office. You know any easier way to make that much money, gents?"

"Cut it out, Red," one of his men growled. "What kinda talk you call that, anyhow?"

Patrick was looking straight at Lon Carroll when he spoke. His voice lost its blatant sound and was even-toned and gritty.

"Ten thousand dollars is one hell of a big wad of money. There ain't a man here wouldn't gamble one of these ag'in' it."

Patrick pulled a .45 cartridge from one of the filled loops in his sagging cartridge belt and held it in the palm of his hand.

"One cent's worth of ca'tridge. It takes one split second to do the job, and a man collects ten thousand."

It was whiskey talk, but each man knew it was the truth. Lon Carroll stood with his thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, his right hand close to his sixgun's ivory butt.

"Henry DuBois," Patrick said, "ain't the only man whose trigger finger is shore itchy. If ever I got the chance to invest this penny's worth of ca'tridge, I'd take it. So would ary man here, if the sign was right. I'm the only damned one man here that's got the guts to declare hisself. And Carroll knows I ain't a-lyin'."

Patrick sobered himself up suddenly with his own ugly talk. He reached for the jug the pockmarked Mex held, thumbed the cork out and drank. When he set the jug on the poker table he still had the .45 cartridge palmed in his hand.

"You'll stop this some day or night," Red Patrick told Carroll. "Or one like it. It'll come from my gun, if I'm that lucky. Or from that notched gun packed by DuBois."

Patrick shoved the cartridge into its belt loop. He wore a pair of silver-mounted Chihuahua spurs with rowels as big as small saucers. The spurs chimed with every swaggering step. The whiskey had set him afire and he was in his bulldozing glory now that he had the backing of his four renegades.

"There ain't no such a damn thing," he shouted suddenly, "as honor amongst us thieves. There's bad blood in every man that ever taken to the outlaw trail. Only way a renegade kin quit this outlaw trail is to grab hisself a South America stake. Then he kin drift. Down in the Argentine he kin change his name and buy all the pampas range he wants for a cent an acre. He can ride good ponies, raise all the cattle he wants. Them South America señoritas is the purtiest things on earth. And they'll come a-flockin' and a-swarmin' around a big gringo. You can set back in the shade with a jug of South America booze and a beautiful señorita tucked under each arm while your gaucho cowhands do the work. All a man needs is a South America stake and he's made his last tracks along the outlaw trail. . . ."

There was a cunning twist to Red Patrick's mouth. It matched the look in his green eyes.

"Carroll has done made his South America stake. He's got it salted down. Only trouble is he don't leave the Hole-in-the-Wall. Because DuBois is a-layin' for him somewheres outside. And ain't that one hell of a note?"

Patrick's loud laugh sounded, then broke off.

"And now comes another thing a man's got to think over before he puts that bullet in Carroll. You kill off this tow-headed gent and that leaves his South America stake buried and salted down where nobody kin find it. It's left there to rot. The devil in hell knows how much money. Fifty . . . a hundred . . . two hundred thousand dollars. A South America stake. Salted down nobody knows where. That right, mister?"

"You're doin' the talkin', Red." Carroll's eyes were cold.

"That's right. I'm a-talkin'. Before

I'm done runnin' off at the head with my whiskey talk, lemme tell you one thing. If ever the sign is right, I'm killin' you and collectin' the bounty. When that job's done, I know where to lay hands on that stake you got planted, Carroll. You kin tack your damn' Santy Claus Amen onto that!"

Carroll grinned faintly. "You're crowdin' your luck, Red," was all he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Map of the Trail to Hell

RED PATRICK was too big-mouthed, drunk or sober. He admitted it readily enough when the four Hole-in-the-Wall outlaws cornered him before Red's border-jumpers arrived.

"You claimed Carroll was in cahoots with DuBois, Red. That he spotted his Powder River outlaws for that bounty hunter to kill. Carroll never double-crossed a man in his life. Either stand up and call yourself a dirty, damned liar, Red, or take your border-jumpers and git outa Hole-in-the-Wall."

"Shore thing I lied. What the hell! I was just hoorawin'. Whiskey talk. That was a damned lie I told to git a rise outa Carroll. He knows it. We all know it. Satisfied, hombres?"

Patrick knew how to talk his way out of a tight. He grinned it off. Called himself a liar, so far as that part of his big-mouthed whiskey talk was concerned.

"But the rest of what I said," maintained the renegade, "goes as she lays. And if she don't lay good it's because you all know you're as guilty as Big Red Patrick. There ain't a man amongst the lot of us that wouldn't shoot Carroll for the bounty on him. Deny that and you're bigger liars than I ever was or will be. Take it or leave it."

It was Lon Carroll, lying on his back on his bunk, who broke the uneasy silence.

"He's right," Carroll said. "But he told only the half of it. There's a law against one outlaw killin' another outlaw for that kind of blood money. It's not a written law. It's one of the unwritten laws that govern the outlaw trail. Any man who shoots me and collects any of that bounty money won't live long enough to enjoy it. He'll be hunted down and killed by men who ride the outlaw trail. Even if they have to cold trail that bounty collector plumb to his big pampas grass ranch in the Argentine. That's the unwritten law. Henry DuBois has a law badge pinned to his undershirt. That's his man-huntin' license. I'd advise you all to leave the bounty huntin' game to DuBois."

Then Carroll's eyes fixed on Patrick and he spoke in that same quiet voice. "Don't let what I just said keep you from tryin', Red."

"Hell, no!" Patrick grinned.

"And you better shoot to kill, Red. Because from now on, so far as me'n you are concerned, nothin' is barred. Come sunrise you take your four border-jumpers and ride outa here. I'm stayin' here. But the next time our trails cross, either on the outside or if you take a notion to come back here, I'm shootin' you on sight."

"That goes double," Patrick grinned.

Then the big, red-whiskered renegade cleared off the round-topped poker table. He found a big piece of brown wrapping paper and spread it out flat on the table. He used a soft-nosed .45 cartridge for a pencil.

"Gather 'round," Red Patrick grinned wolfishly at his four pardners. "I'll map out our bank robbers' trail to Buffalo."

Then, in the light of the lantern, Patrick mapped out their trail, talking as he drew his map, like some cavalry officer briefing an attack for a squad of troopers.

"Here's where we are now. We travel north acrost Middle Fork, through this gap in the Red Wall. Swing off to'rds the east when we're outa the Hole-in-the-Wall till we git to the town called Kaycee, where I got us a relay of fresh horses waitin'. But we split up before we reach Kaycee. When we meet in town, we're all rank strangers to one another. We saddle a fresh horse apiece and each feller pulls out alone. We'll throw in together again where the trail crosses the North Fork of Powder River. We're on the wagon road then to Buffalo but we don't travel the road. We split in half an' foller the road a ways off, so's we're just cowhands ridin' along, never on the road, but always in far sight of it. We'll camp that night above the road crossin' on the South

Fork of Crazy Woman Crick. I got a change of horses waitin' for us there. That's where we start from on the home stretch. Next stop is the bank at Buffalo. . . ."

Patrick wasn't drunk now. He had this robbery planned and the route mapped out. Relays of fresh horses waiting. The glitter in his green eyes was crafty.

"You got this drawed out," Mex said, "like you bin there an' back. Them relay horses . . . who's a-holdin' them relay horses, Big Red?"

"NOBODY you know. But he'll do to take along. I laid aroun' Kaycee a couple weeks till I found the right man. He's a good 'un. He knows the country and he knows the layout at Buffalo. He don't drink. Works for the big cow outfits as a bronc-peeler. Rides the rough string. But he makes his big money gamblin' on the side. When he's cleaned out them cowhands with a deck of cards or a pair of dice he drifts on to another big spread. He's a tinhorn gambler. Dresses like a range dude. But he's a shore purty bronc-rider. He won first money ridin' at Kaycee an' Buffalo. And while I never seen him go for a gun I'll gamble he's chain lightnin'. Yeah, this Frenchy will do to take along. Slim, quick-movin', with a hatchet face and the coldest pair of light gray eyes I ever seen—"

"I'm leery of strangers, Red," Mex said.

The others shared Mex's suspicions. Slim and Heavy and Bowlegs.

Red Patrick glared at them. "Try to pull off a holdup," he snarled, "and fix the trail goin' in, an' the fast get-away from Buffalo without some smart-brained gent like this Frenchy, and you're just so many big, clumsy bewildered country boys. Hell, it's the easy trail in an' the quick get-away that counts. Any tough bunch with guns kin stick up a bank. But if you can't git away with the money without bein' cut down, that dough ain't doin' you no good in hell. Frenchy knows every foot of the country. He knows the inside of that bank, to boot. Here's the map he drawed me."

Patrick took a folded paper from inside the little, leather-covered tally book he carried in his pants pocket. There was a neatly-drawn pen-and-ink map of the inside of the bank.

"Here's the cashier's window; there's the teller's window. Bookkeepers' desk there. The vault is at the back. There's only three men inside to take care of—and the vault will be open.

"We come up this back street and turn up the side street an' stop at the side door. Bowlegs holds the horses there. Heavy opens the side door an' stands there. Me'n Mex an' Slim walk in through the front door and lock it when we go in. It's five minutes till three in the afternoon. Closin' time is three o'clock. We got them three bank things covered and we pull the blinds. We herd them three bank gents over against the far wall an' make 'em lay flat on their faces. One looks up he gits his face kicked in. One of 'em opens his trap or makes a wrong move, he gits hit over the head with a gun barrel. Knocked out. No killin'. No gun noise. All quick an' quiet. The bank's closed for the day. . . .

"We fill our gunnysacks quick. No heavy silver. The gold is heavy so it goes into two sacks that'll heft the same weight when they're tied together and slung acrost a man's saddle. The paper money goes into two more sacks. Then we shove them three bank gents into the big vault and we swing the vault door shut and lock it. There's a time lock. Frenchy told me how to set it. That bank vault can't be opened till the next mornin' at ten o'clock. They kin holler their heads off inside that vault an' can't a sound be heard even if you was standin' directly outside."

"What'll them three fellers do for air?" Mex asked.

"They do without, after they've used up what's locked inside." Patrick's grin was ugly.

"That's murder, Big Red. Suffocatin' them three pore, white-collared dudes that-away." Mex didn't like it.

"We kin hogtie 'em, Red," Bowlegs said. "Tie gags in their mouths."

"They'd work each other loose. Half an hour, an hour and there'd be a law posse on our trail. Since when you four hombres got religion? Hell, I've seen you

shoot greasers in the back just fer the hell of it! I'm ramroddin' this, and you'll take orders! Them white-collared dudes handlin' all that money day after day without the guts to steal it, is better off dead, the white-livered things!"

"Where's this Frenchy all the time, Big Red?"

"Holdin' them relay horses for us there at the crossin' on Crazy Woman, where we'll pay him off."

"How much cut of the proceeds does this Frenchy expect?"

"Frenchy," grinned Red Patrick, "wants a fifty-fifty cut."

"Half of what we take? Just for holdin' them horses ready?"

"That's the cut Frenchy expects. It comes outa your half. After I git mine."

"The hell you say!"

"THAT'S the deal I made with Frenchy." The red-whiskered grin bared his big yellow teeth.

"You big hearted son!" Mex was grinning.

"You ketch on, now?" Patrick chuckled.

"Frenchy," grinned the pockmarked Mex, "gits a Mexican stand-off."

"There's four of you curly wolves," Patrick reached for the jug, "only one of Frenchy. Should be pickin's."

"Where'll you be while we gun-argue this out with that Frenchy, Big Red?"

"I'll be holdin' the money in the gunnysacks."

"And ain't that like you," Heavy growled, "always takin' the dirty work off our hands."

"I'm ramroddin' this," Patrick said. "I'm the big brains. I got this bank-robbin' job down to where it's fool proof. Cut an' dried. There she lays, mapped out."

Patrick gulped the raw whiskey and passed the jug. He grinned at Lon Carroll, who was stretched out on his bunk smoking.

"You said I had guts but no brains," Patrick said. "Mebbyso you could plan this bank-robbin' job any better?"

Carroll lay on his back, blew a smoke ring and poked a finger through it. He never so much as looked at Patrick when he spoke. "Nobody could plan it any slicker. But it wasn't you that planned it, Red. It was Frenchy."

Big Red Patrick's grin flattened out. There in the lantern light he looked like a red-muzzled ape. For a long moment he crouched in his chair, his eyes slitted. He had been the big, tough ramrod of a bank robber outfit. Showing off how smart he was, and cunning. Drawing his map. Pointing out the trail. Telling his renegades what each one had to do. Grinning off the contemplated cold-blooded murder of three harmless bank employees. And finally foisting the murder of Frenchy onto his partners. And all the while Patrick was drunk with his self-importance as a leader of an outlaw gang.

While yonder on a bunk stretched Lon Carroll, who had ridden in the lead of his notorious Powder River Gang. Veteran of many well-planned robberies. With the remarkable record that still held true after his gang had been hunted down, one man at a time, and killed by DuBois. The record was this: They had never killed a man during the actual hold-ups.

"All right," Patrick snarled. "So Frenchy planned it. But what the hell

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happens to Frenchy when we get goin'?"

"Not bein' a fortune teller," Carroll said, "I couldn't say. Like as not he's got his own plans—and the brains and guts to carry them out. To your sorrow, Red. And the sorrow of your pardners."

"The hell you say! You know this Frenchy?"

"Only by the description you gave him. Frenchy is Henry DuBois!"

CHAPTER SIX

Fill Your Hand!

THERE was a stunned silence. Big Red Patrick sat back in the heavy homemade rawhide-backed armchair as though he'd had the wind kicked out of him.

Mex, Slim, Heavy and Bowlegs, sitting at the table where they had been studying the map, shoved back their chairs. They looked at Big Red with a mixture of doubt, suspicion and disgust.

They were ready to quit Red right now. Their silence was far more bitter than any hot words of accusation.

Mex got slowly to his feet. The other three followed suit. There was a vicious look on Mex's face. He was taking over the leadership.

"A while ago," Mex said, "you accused Carroll of double-crossin' his Powder River Gang—sellin' 'em out to DuBois for a half cut of the bounty money. There ain't a big enough price on our hides to make that worth the risk you'd be takin'."

"Hellamighty, Mex, I wouldn't do nothin' like that to you fellers!" Patrick was shaking his head.

"Shut up, Red!" Mex had a toneless voice. "You done your share of talkin'. You're through."

Patrick looked at the man for a long moment, then slumped in his chair.

"From what a man hears about Du Bois," Mex said, "he don't bother with two-bit coyote pelts. All he goes after is the real curly wolves like Carroll. There ain't enough bounty on our whole five two-bit coyote hides to make more than small change. Stands to reason that when DuBois connivered around to throw in with you on this robbery deal, he's playin' for bigger stakes than our coyote hides. From where I'm standin' it looks to me like DuBois has got somethin' else in mind when he called hisself Frenchy and dealt hisself in on the safe end of the bank deal. He talked you into a fifty-fifty cut of the proceeds. That right?"

"Yeah. That's what he wants."

"For just holdin' the horses? What else was he usin' for chips to set into this game, Red?"

He wasn't Big Red any longer. Just Red.

"Frenchy said he'd guarantee us all a sure get-away." The bluster was gone now from Patrick's voice.

"How the hell kin any man guarantee that? It don't make sense."

"Frenchy said he knowed every foot of the country. He'd have the relay horses ready. We'd be back through the Hole-in-the-Red-Wall before a law posse could pick up our trail. And he claimed he could throw the posse off when they did pick up our sign. If you'd listened to what he said an' how he said it, you'd a believed him. Same as I got roped into it. I'll still gamble that Frenchy is playin' for big stakes. There won't be no law trap set at Buffalo."

"At Buffalo?" Mex snarled. "Hell, no! But DuBois will be holdin' them horses at Crazy Woman Crick. The bank job is done. We'll have the money in gunnysacks. And that's where DuBois collects his fifty-fifty cut. *After* us fellers taken all the risks at Buffalo. DuBois drives a shore purty bargain."

Red Patrick needed whiskey. He reached out slowly, almost furtively towards the jug, his green eyes fixed on Mex.

"Help yourself," Mex sneered. "You look like you need somethin' to take the chill outa your guts. You'll need more bravemaker before we git back to the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch with that South America stake—providin' you live that long, Red."

"What you drivin' at, Mex?"

"We're takin' DuBois up on his own deal. But we ain't goin' into it with his damned dust kicked into our eyes. He's marked his cold deck. We'll play 'em as he deals 'em. Till we git back to where he's holdin' them horses on Crazy Woman Crick. Then we kick the lid off."

"You ain't a-goin' through with it, now, Mex?" Red Patrick looked scared.

"THE hell we ain't, Red! And if you and this Frenchy thing has got 'er made to cut us four down, then we'll shore see to it that you carry out the idee like you an' Frenchy got 'er all so purty mapped. Only change in the plans is that you and Frenchy is goin' to be on the receivin' end of some gunfire."

"And that ain't no lie," Heavy growled.

"What's your vote, Slim?" Mex asked.

"It'll be Red's hard luck," Slim said. "Regardless."

"Bowlegs?" Mex grinned.

"This is one," said the tough Bowlegs, "that Red can't talk hisself out of."

"So there she is, Red," Mex said. "Either you're as thick-skulled dumb as it looks. Or you're as smart as you brag about bein'. Either this detective has sucked you into a con game or he's talked you into throwin' in with him. With us four gents dead, you and Frenchy could split the proceeds. Frenchy gits our half. You keep your half. And when the law posse follered our trail to Crazy Woman Crick, there would be DuBois with four dead bank robbers to show for his work. He'd have his story down pat: how one of them bank robbers got away from him. And the feller got away taken all the bank money along. That's the game you could be playin' in cahoots with DuBois if he showed you the law badge pinned to his undershirt, Red."

"You know I wouldn't play no dirty, double-crossin' trick like that on you fellers, Mex!"

"The hell we know it! What was that you said a while ago, Red? About there wasn't no honor amongst thieves?"

"Hell, Mex, I never meant—"

"You talk too much, Red. You start swingin' that big loop of yourn and directly you tangle yourself in it."

"I was just hoorawin', Mex."

"You wasn't joshin' when you told Carroll that you'd shoot him in the back to collect the bounty on his hide," Mex said flatly. "A man who'd do that, wouldn't stop at nothin'."

"I hate Carroll's guts!"

"That ain't no reason to murder a man for bounty!" Mex's black eyes stared the red-whiskered, hulking outlaw down.

"You don't know what that son done, Mex. Ner what he aims to do. If I was to tell you, you wouldn't blame me. Carroll stole my wife an' kid! Lemme tell you—"

Lon Carroll swung his legs over the edge of his bunk and was on his feet. His hand was on his gun.

"Fill your hand, Red!" Carroll rasped.

Patrick just sat there in his chair. His skin mottled, glistening with sweat above the shaggy red beard. Hatred was in his eyes. Slowly he lifted two empty hands.

"When the sign is right," he said, "I'll kill you. You got the bulge on me. Damn well you know it."

"Then tell us you lied, Red. Or I'm goin' to make you pull a gun."

"All right. I lied."

But there was a twisted, snarling grin on his red-bearded mouth. He reached for the jug again. This time he took hold of it and they all watched him drink.

Mex, Slim, Heavy and Bowlegs watched the two men. If Patrick was telling the truth, and said he lied only because Carroll had the bulge on him, then that was something else. They could understand why Red would kill Carroll. Ornery as they were, they had a strange, strict respect for women. If Carroll had stolen Patrick's wife while Red was on the dodge somewheres. . . .

BUT the four Hole-in-the-Wall outlaws had seen Carroll keep Patrick from killing himself when he was locoed drunk. They were backing Lon. Guns slid into sight.

"Say the word, Lon," one man said, "and there'll be four border-jumpers in hell for breakfast."

"Then mebbyso we could git some sleep around here," said another.

"That's all it would take now, to tear hell loose in here." Carroll shook his head slowly. "It would be a mean shame," he grinned, "to disappoint the plans Henry DuBois got laid out."

"Providin' these tough hombres from down along the Mexican border has got the guts to go through with it."

"We'll be back here," said Mex, "with our gunnysacks filled. And back yonder, where he made his play, there'll be the

dead carcass of DuBois. And Lon Carroll will owe us a drink."

"That ain't the way DuBois has 'er made," said Carroll.

"You want to back that up with money?" Mex snarled.

"I'll cover every dollar you fetch back to the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch," Carroll said, "to pay the bet."

"That's a bet." Mex grinned.

"What'll you give for DuBois' dead carcass?" he added.

"Not a dollar. I don't handle bounty money."

A flush colored the swarthy pock-marked face. The muddy eyes of the half-breed Mex looked at Carroll with hatred.

"I'll pay you back for that," he said tonelessly.

* * *

Mex wasn't ramrodding the robber outfit when they saddled fresh horses and pulled out from the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch at daybreak.

Big, tough, half-drunk Red Patrick had taken back the leadership he had so nearly lost. He had waited until the sign was right. Until they were saddled and mounted. And there, in the cold gray dawn, Red had bared his yellow fangs in a wolfish grin.

"Which-away, Mex?" he chuckled.

"Huh?"

"You're leadin' this pasear. Which-away to the Hole-in-the-Red Wall?"

Mex, Slim, Heavy and Bowlegs had come up from the south. Easy enough, coming from that direction, to reach the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch on Powder River. The gap in what was called the Red Wall lay to the north and that was the Hole-in-the-Wall. None of the four border-jumpers had ever been through the Hole-in-the-Red Wall. You had to have a thorough knowledge of this strip of outlaw range to find the hole. So far as those four strangers were concerned, they knew they were lost. They'd be wasting valuable time and riding down their horses if they tried to find it.

Red Patrick had them where he wanted them. He was drunk enough now to play his tough hand out.

"If I ain't ramroddin' this outfit when we reach Crazy Woman Crick," he told them as he sat with his weight in one stirrup and his hand on his six-shooter, "this Frenchy gent is goin' to be almighty irked when we change horses on our trail to Buffalo. Think 'er over."

"Turn it over to him, Mex," Heavy growled. "What the hell's the difference who's leadin' this circle? Big Red's the only man here knows how to git through the hole. We're wastin' time. Rarin' to go an' can't go fer rarin'. You're ramroddin' this, Big Red. Let's go!"

They had spent all night drinking and going over their plans. Half a dozen times they had jangled and quarreled and the rivalry between Red and Mex had flared. Rotgut booze brought out all their hatreds, and they snapped and snarled among themselves, and each man was looking out for his own tough hide.

All night long Lon Carroll watched and listened and kept his hand near a gun. The four Hole-in-the-Wall outlaws watched and listened and gave up all notion of sleep. They passed their own jug from bunk to bunk, but they drank sparingly. Their guns were ready in case this border-jumper outfit took a sudden notion to smoke them out.

Now in the dawn Carroll and his four men watched Patrick ride off in the lead. When they had ridden out of sight Carroll grinned slowly after them, his eyes cold.

"They never taken the trouble to cook breakfast, Lon," a man said. "That's a long ride to make on an empty belly."

"Grub would kill the drunk they got on," Lon said slowly. "Cold sober, they'd never tackle the job."

"You reckon Red has made some kind of a deal with DuBois, Lon?"

"Not knowin'," Carroll grinned, "I couldn't say."

OUTLAW LON CARROLL had his own ideas. He valued them for what they were worth. And kept his findings to himself.

His men knew he had something figured but they asked no questions. They were just four cowhands who had worked for forty-a-month wages until some twist of fate had driven them to the outlaw trail. While Carroll was a big-time outlaw who had led a hard-riding bunch of men like

himself on many a dangerous trail. They had done their dangerous jobs with cold-nerved swiftness and ease without ever having killed a man during an actual hold-up. The others had, though, in running gun fights with law posses, been forced to do some shooting.

Now those men who had called themselves the Powder River Gang were all dead. Hunted down and killed by Henry DuBois.

Carroll was the lone survivor of his gang. He had his South America stake salted down somewheres. He was wintering at Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch, he had said, until the sign was right for him to pull out. That was what Carroll had told his four men. To them it sounded logical. He had not added to it and they had let it go at that.

Now Lon Carroll walked off by himself. He went over to where the big rawhide hung drying on the corral. For a while he stood there looking at it, a flat grin on his face.

He wasn't wintering here. Perhaps, deep inside, he had known all along that he wouldn't winter here. Nor would he ever see South America.

So much for a man's plans. An outlaw with a price on his head has forfeited his rights to make plans. The long arm of the law was too far-reaching, its grip too relentless.

A man gits tired a-runnin', Carroll said to himself as he stared at the sodden beef hide without seeing it. His eyes had a bleak look, there in the dawn. Those puckered blue eyes mirrored the man's thoughts and those thoughts were grim and empty of hope.

Perhaps there were times when an outlaw fooled himself. When he let himself get carried off by dreams. Like when he played Santa Claus for a crippled child. And for the first time since he had taken to the outlaw trail had let himself look at a woman. A woman with tear-misted eyes that were soft, dark gray. Her voice had been hardly more than a whisper.

"I don't know who you are," she had told Lon Carroll, "only you are a *good* man. God won't overlook what you have done for me and my baby. We will remind Him of you every night in our prayers."

Her name was Mary and she had taken both his hands in hers and had kissed him. Then he had ridden away and he had not seen her since. Nor did she know his name or who he was or anything about him.

Before he left that little border ranch he had given her a thick roll of currency held together by a wide black rubber band. And had told her the name of a doctor in Montana, at a little cowtown called Chinook.

"Doc Gray is more than a doctor. He's got more real religion in him than most sky-pilot parsons. Take your young 'un to him. You both need Doc Gray. And he won't let you down. You tell him I said so . . . Outlaw Lon. . . ."

"Outlaw Lon." That was when she had kissed him.

She had gone there. She was living there at Chinook now. Carroll had ways of getting the news when the leaves rustled.

In Carroll's wallet was a letter from Doc Gray that he had gotten at a blind post office along the trail. Unsigned. No names mentioned. Read by anyone but Carroll its wording held no meaning of any importance. But it gave Lon the news. Mary and the little crippled girl she had on that Christmas Day named Lonnie, she'd told him when he left, were there. She was keeping house for little Doc. Helping him in his office as a nurse. A friend of Doc's, a noted specialist at Chicago, was coming to Montana for the trout fishing. But he was holding very little hope for the child. When that child died, a part of the mother would be dead and buried in that little grave. She would need the friendship of the only man who had any place in her heart, then.

When you're in this part of the cow-country, come to see me. We have something to talk over.

Lon Carroll knew that paragraph by heart. He knew the letter by heart. He knew what they would talk over. They'd discussed it before, more than once. He hadn't sent word to Gray that he'd be coming one day. But Doc knew he'd show up. You never tried to fool Doc.

But before Carroll rode the dim trail to Chinook he had a job to get done and over with. Carroll dreaded that job. He had

never killed a man. But he knew that he had to kill two men. Regardless. One was Red Patrick. The other was Henry DuBois. Then, and only then, would the trail to Chinook be clear for Lon Carroll to ride. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Quick-Trigger Death

WAITING is tough. There at the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch Lon Carroll was sweating it out alone. Waiting for news of the bank hold-up at Buffalo. Watching for Patrick's return.

The four outlaws who had been "resting up" there had pulled out for Brown's Hole country. They were gathering cattle down the trail somewhere, they said. Perhaps they were lying. More likely they were getting spooked. That bank hold-up would louse up the country with law posses. They couldn't make a living rustling cattle when there were posses prowling the country and taking shots at strangers. It would be weeks before the cow-country would be safe to work for cattle to drive off. Those four Hole-in-the-Wall outlaws didn't want to be mistaken for the Patrick border-jumpers. Carroll didn't blame them for drifting far and fast. He knew how they felt.

He didn't mind being left alone. A man on the dodge spent much time alone. It gave him time to think things over. But the waiting was beginning to wear at his nerves. He kept a horse saddled; daytimes he rode in the direction of the Red Wall and kept lookout until dusk. Then he rode back to the ranch, changed horses and, after supper, bedded down somewhere away from the buildings and corrals. His sleep was uneasy; at the slightest sound he'd be awake, a gun in his hand.

A man couldn't keep that up forever.

It was five days after Red Patrick had ridden away when Carroll sighted the lone horsebacker coming from the direction of the Red Wall. It was just before sunrise.

Carroll, on horseback, rode in behind heavy brush near the trail and waited with his gun in his hand. He hoped it was Red Patrick so he could meet the man and kill him—or get killed.

But the rider was Mex. Mex had his left arm wrapped in a bandage crusted with dried blood. He carried it in a crude sling. A stubble of wiry black beard covered the lower part of his face. Above the whiskers his swarthy, pockmarked skin was the color of putty. His eyes were bloodshot and pain-seared.

"Stand your hand, Mex!"

Carroll rode out from behind the brush, his six-shooter leveled.

Mex gave him an ugly grin and told him to tuck in his shirt-tail.

"You win your bet, mister. I don't fetch back a dollar. What I need now worse than money is a drink of rotgut. That damned Red double-crossed us. I'm the only one of us four that got away alive. But if you got the guts to side me I'm goin' back to tackle Patrick and his pardner DuBois. And you might as well throw in with me. Because Red and his pardner is after your ten thousand dollar hide. And that's no lie."

Mex cursed Big Red. He said the robbery had gone through without a hitch. Only they hadn't let Red lock the bank employes in the vault to smother to death. They'd hogtied and gagged 'em and left 'em on the floor.

But Frenchy hadn't been waiting at the Crazy Woman Creek crossing. The relay horses were there, but no Frenchy. Red had told them Frenchy must have spooked; gotten suspicious that they'd read his range detective brand and high-tailed it.

So they'd changed horses at Crazy Woman and come on, riding hard, headed for the Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch. Big Red Patrick rode a hundred yards in the lead of the other four, packing all the money. When they reached the Hole-in-the-Red Wall at dusk, Big Red had ridden into the narrow pass and out of sight in the dusk. Mex and Bowlegs came right behind Slim and Heavy. They'd ridden straight into the gun trap.

ALL hell tore loose there in the dusk. Slim and Heavy were shot out of their saddles. Then Bowlegs got it.

"I'd a turned tail there an' then but my damned horse stampeded with me. The shootin' spooked 'im. He went straight into that gunfire an' through it, me a-lay-

in' flat along his neck. Red was a-shootin' at me from one side an' Frenchy from the other side. If the light had bin better I'd be dead now. I got through lucky, and come on. I was shot through the arm an' bleedin' like a stuck hog an' the pain soured the booze in me an' I got sick as a poisoned dog. I got lost in the night. . . ."

They rode to the ranch together. Lon Carroll told Mex the jug was where they'd left it, and just as full. He dressed and bandaged the flesh wound in the renegade's upper arm. It was a shallow bullet rip that had bled a lot and had a swollen, poisoned look. The hand and fingers were puffed. A scared look came into Mex's muddy eyes when Carroll told him it looked like blood poisoning.

"Blood poison! A man kin lose an arm!"

"A man kin die, Mex."

"That red-muzzled son! Oh, that dirty damned red—"

"There's a doctor at Kaycee that'll keep his mouth shut if you got enough money to make it worth his trouble, Mex."

"Kaycee, hell! The law'll pick me up right now, I show up anywheres. Damn that Red! He knowed that when—"

Mex shut up abruptly. Carroll let on like he didn't notice. He knew Mex was lying.

"I'll pay you back for that!" Mex had made a threat at Carroll before they pulled out to rob the bank. Mex wasn't the man to forget.

Mex had the jug and was drinking the raw booze like it was water. He was in a sweat to get saddled and guide Carroll to the Hole-in-the-Red Wall, where he claimed he'd left Patrick, DuBois and the loot.

Carroll saddled a fresh horse for Mex. They pulled out. Mex took along the jug. Mex said something about sending to Kaycee for that doctor.

"Send who?" Lon asked, as they rode side by side. "Who you figger on sendin' to Kaycee for that doctor, Mex?"

The pain throbbed in his swollen arm. The booze had made him drunk. Fear of poisoning had the renegade half locoed. His muddy eyes cut Lon a sidelong look. What he read now in Carroll's eyes made him twist sideways in his saddle. He clawed for his six-shooter. Carroll shot him straight through his barrel chest.

Mex lay dying there on the ground when Lon squatted beside him. The fear of death glazed his muddy eyes. His voice croaked.

"It happened that-away, only I hollered an' give up when Red yelled at me to throw away my gun. Then him and this DuBois told it to me . . . DuBois had ketched on when he give us our relay horses at Crazy Woman on the way to Buffalo. He taken Red aside and put it to him cold turkey. Red was to lead us into that trap DuBois would set at the Red Wall. Big Red would help kill us off there and the two of 'em would split. But they didn't kill me. They saved me . . . and sent me on to decoy you into the trap Red an' DuBois has set for you at the Red Wall. Big Red talked me into lettin' him crease my arm with a bullet to trim up my story. I hated your guts—I still hate your guts. They was cuttin' me in for a third . . . Damn 'em to hell . . . I'm dyin' now . . . And I'm scared to die . . . gimme . . . likker . . . damn you. . . ."

Mex died cursing Carroll covered the dead man with a saddle slicker and turned Mex's horse loose. Then he rode on alone.

He had killed his first man. He had no regrets about it. No feeling of any kind. Neither hatred nor pity for the dead Mex. Lon Carroll was on his way to a gun trap. There would be no quarter given.

But they would not shoot Carroll down without warning. They wouldn't kill him outright. Because they knew that somewhere he had a South America stake cached. And besides that money Patrick wanted to lear from Lon where his wife and crippled child were. Red figured she had Lon's stake, holding it for him. Lon had let Red believe that, though it wasn't true.

THE trail twisted among giant boulders and brush patches. This would be the place. Carroll had the six he had taken from Mex shoved into the fork of his saddle under the saddle horn. His own ivory-handled six-shooter, in its holster, was in plain view. His saddle carbine was in its scabbard.

"Hold up!"

A bullet clipped the crown of Carroll's Stetson. He lifted his right arm high,

using his left hand to rein his lunging horse to a halt. He was riding a gun-broke horse. The horse was lunging because he had both spur rowels dug deep.

"Don't shoot! I'm empty-handed!"

Red Patrick rode out from behind the boulders, his six covering Lon.

"I got you now, you rotten, damn—"

"Looks that-away," Lon said.

"What happened to Mex?" Red snarled. "We heard shootin'."

"Mex tried to collect that bounty on my hide—like you got the same notion in mind, Red. Henry DuBois won't let you git away with it. While you're killin' me, he'll shoot you where your galluses cross. Don't never turn your big back to give your new pardner a shot at, Red. That's just my two-bit advice."

Red turned his shaggy, red-whiskered head for a second to glare in behind the big boulders.

"Come on out, Frenchy! This coyote claims you're aimin' to murder me!"

Frenchy Henry DuBois rode out from behind the rocks, a black-haired, hatchet-faced man with pale, bleak eyes.

"Split your South America stake with me, Carroll, and I'll forget the ten thousand dollar bounty," DuBois said softly. "Big Red just fetched home the bacon. We can pool it all and the three of us throw in together."

"No dice, DuBois," Lon said quietly. "You forget too quickly, DuBois. You killed off my men. Murdered 'em for their bounty. And Big Red Patrick knows why one of us, either him or me, has got to die here." His right hand was held high.

Patrick looked uneasy.

Lon grinned slowly. "That's a good idea, Red. Kill the bounty-hunter first."

The trick worked. Their eyes cut away from Lon to look at each other. Mex's gun was in Lon's left hand. He'd dropped the tied bridle reins over his saddle horn and grabbed the gun with the same unbroken motion. They didn't know that Lon was ambidexterous.

Lon's left gun spat flame and the .45 slug struck DuBois in the brisket. He doubled up and the bullet from his silver mounted six-shooter went wild.

Carroll's second slug was a gut-shot that staggered Big Red in his saddle and spoiled his aim.

Bullets whined and snarled around Lon's head as he kept shooting.

When the gun in his left hand fired its last shot Lon had his own six-shooter in his right hand.

Henry DuBois lay on his back on the ground. Three bullets were in his chest and belly, any one of them a death shot.

Patrick was dying. He lay slobbering and sobbing.

Carroll sat his horse, his smoking gun in his hand, staring down at the two men he had shot. Then Patrick's hoarse sobbing choked off into a death rattle and blood spilled from his mouth. He was dead. . . .

Carroll heard the thunder of shod hoofs. He rode in behind the brush and boulders. Then he sighted the four Hole-in-the-Wall outlaws riding towards him from the direction of Hole-in-the-Wall Ranch and he rode out into the open to meet them.

"We got to thinkin' 'er over, Lon, and we turned back. Looks like we got here too late to do you much good."

Carroll said it didn't matter. It was done and over with now and he hadn't got so much as a bullet scratch. He told them to take the three dead men to Kaycee and deliver their carcasses to the sheriff there and collect bounty if they could.

"Tell the sheriff that I've got that bank robbery money and that I'm turnin' it in to the law, every dollar of it."

A WEEK later Carroll rode into the cowtown of Chinook, Montana. Slung on his saddle were two bulging gunnysacks. He hadn't shaved and his whiskers were a dusty yellow stubble. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot. He had spent that week mostly in the saddle. When he reached Chinook it was past sundown. Nobody paid any attention to the horsebacker who reined up at the hitchrack in front of Doc Gray's log house at the edge of town.

Carroll untied the saddle strings and slung the two gunnysacks over his shoulder. A lamp burned in Gray's office. The shades were up and he saw Doc standing there.

Then Carroll saw her. She had on a nurse's white uniform and her heavy, smoky hair made her skin look whiter than it was.

Carroll opened the outer door.

When Mary recognized Carroll she swayed a little. But when Doc Gray reached out a quick hand to steady her she smiled and shook her head and walked past him towards Carroll.

"I knew you'd come." Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. Her hands went up to his whiskered face and she kissed him. It was a desperate, hungry kiss that bruised both their mouths. Carroll held her close.

Doc Gray picked up the gunnysacks and laid them on the white metal operating table. Then he took two satchels from a cupboard and placed them with the gunnysacks. Walking back to his desk he opened a drawer and took out a bottle of whiskey and two clean shot glases. Then he smiled, brought out a third glass and filled all three glasses to the brim.

Mary had quit sobbing. Her smile was a little pitiful. "It's the first time I've been able to cry," she said, "since the baby Lonnie died two weeks ago."

"Nothing could save the child," Doc said gently. "The specialist from Chicago said it was too late for an operation. Had she lived she would have been a helpless cripple all her life. God's mercy. . . ."

"She met death so happily," Mary said. "At the last she spoke of you . . . Santa Claus . . . She no longer remembered her father. . . ."

They knew all about the Buffalo bank robbery. The killing of the bank robbers. They had heard of the death of Henry DuBois, range detective, who had played both ends against the middle and lost. The local newspaper headlined the statement made by the men who had delivered the bodies to the Kaycee sheriff.

OUTLAW LON CARROLL PROMISES TO RETURN BANK ROBBERY LOOT INTACT!

Then, when they had shown Carroll the newspapers, Doc Gray handed them each a filled shot glass and lifted his own. He told Mary to hold her nose if she must, but to drink her medicine.

Then he told her to clean Lon up, feed him and to keep him awake. Until he got back.

"Where you goin', Doc?" Carroll asked.

"I'm fetching the parson and Sheriff Ike Niber. I'm collecting ten thousand dollars bounty on your hide. If I can't make this dicker with the Governor of Montana stick I'll go to South America with you."

An hour later Carroll and Mary were married. Gray gave the bride away.

Niber said there wasn't any sense in locking Lon up. "I'll just take your guns, Lon."

Niber said he didn't know what to do with all that money. The bank wouldn't open until ten o'clock in the morning. Doc might as well shove it all back in the cupboard. If it was a million, there wasn't a man in Montana would take a dollar of it as long as Doc Gray was responsible.

"They'll run Doc Gray for governor some day," said Ike Niber. "He'll git every vote in the country and they'll come ridin' in a bunch up the outlaw trail to vote for him. And if Doc Gray says he'll buy Lon Carroll an absolute pardon when he's tried, with this money you fetched to Doc, then gamble on it, Lon. It's in the sack."

Thus Niber proved himself a prophet.

THE END

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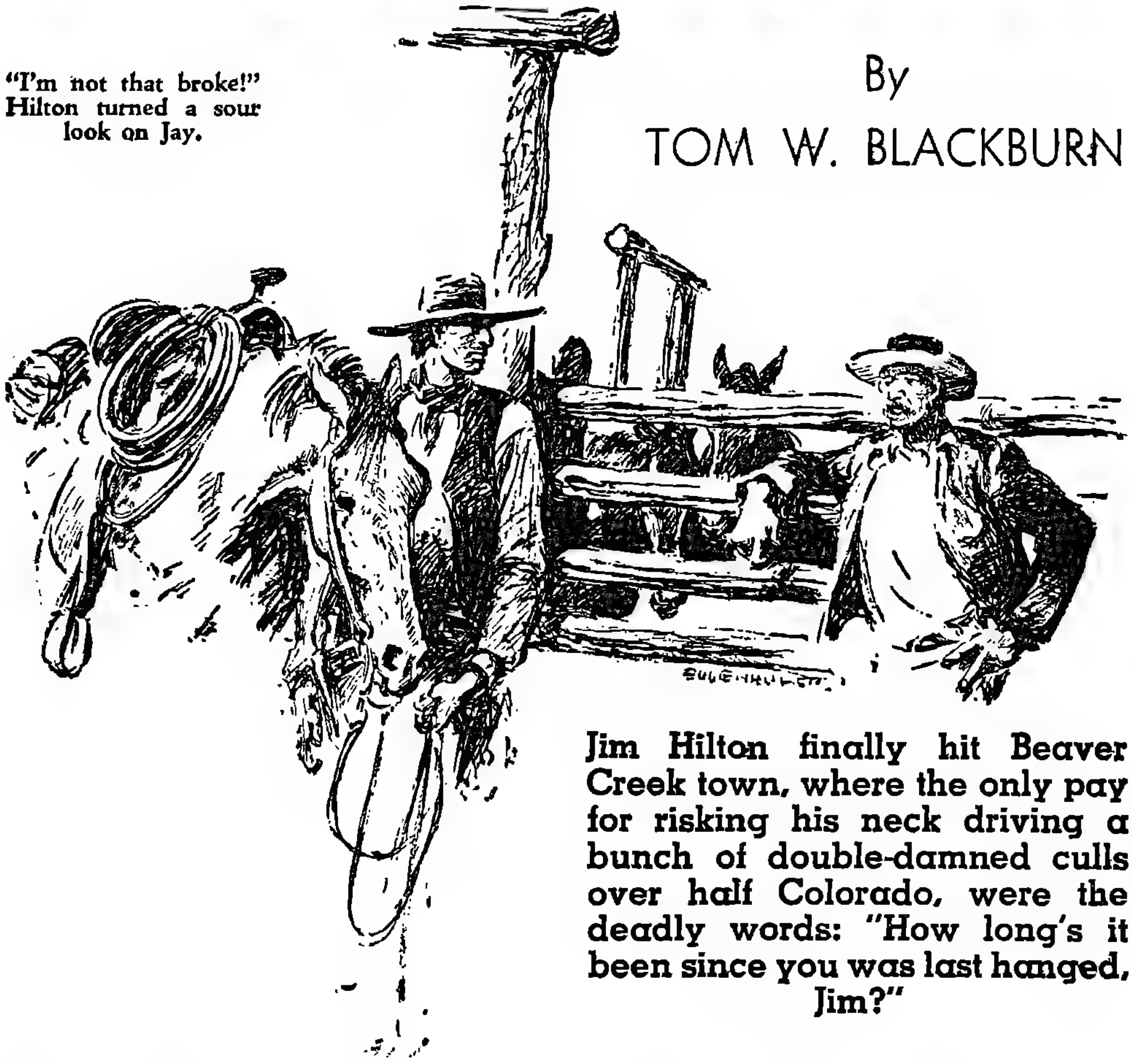


"I'm not that broke!" Hilton turned a sour look on Jay.

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

Jim Hilton finally hit Beaver Creek town, where the only pay for risking his neck driving a bunch of double-damned culls over half Colorado, were the deadly words: "How long's it been since you was last hanged, Jim?"

WHEN the corral gate swung closed Hilton wiped the sweat and dust from his eyes. Barron Jay dropped wire hasps over the projecting end-post of the gate and moved back to where Hilton stood beside his sweat-streaked saddle pony. Inside the corral, the horse cavvy Hilton had brought down across miles of gray-green grass to Beaver Creek milled restlessly, chafing against the corral poles after the freedom of the drive down across half of Colorado. Jay looked at the animals in the corral, then swung his narrow gaze toward Hilton.

"A man that would drive that many head alone is a fool!" he said flatly.

Hilton nodded pleasantly. "Or broke," he agreed.

"Aim to sell them, then?" Jay asked sharply.

"I hear the cavalry's buying remounts," Hilton said.

Jay's lips tightened a little and his eyes on Hilton probed for detail. "I've got the Army contract," he said. "It's ex-

clusive. There's no chance for an outsider."

"So I heard," Hilton answered, undisturbed. He swabbed at his face again with his kerchief. Jay moved closer to him and jabbed with the stubby finger of a well-kept hand.

"Stock is changing hands pretty fast in this country, mister," he growled. "Too fast, for some folks. There's talk about it. How does a man with empty pockets turn up with thirty-forty head of tolerable riding stock—all of a sudden and from nowhere?"

"The name," Hilton said slowly, "is Jim Hilton. I told you I drove this stuff down from the Platte. As to how I got them, does the Army ask you how you get your stuff?"

"No," Jay admitted carefully.

"All right," Hilton told him. "Let's stick to business."

"You aim to sell this bunch to me?" the buyer asked.

"I haven't heard an offer."

Jay touched his lips with his tongue, his eyes wary and hard. "Fifteen dollars a head," he suggested.

"I'm not that broke!" Hilton turned a sour look on Jay. He wheeled, then, starting away from the corral.

Jay caught his arm. "Listen here!" the man said sharply. "I don't board somebody else's broomtails for free. I thought this was one of my own bunches coming in until you had half of them into my corral. I tallied forty of them. At a dime a head they cost you four bucks for every day you hold them behind my bars. It's that or you can run them back out and hold them on open grass yourself."

"After that drive I just finished?" Hilton protested. "Hell, I got to sleep and feed for a change. Call it four bucks." He started away again.

The buyer checked him once more. "Leave 'em too long and the rate'll go up," he warned. "By tomorrow that corral will be full of my own stuff. It comes and goes. How we going to keep the animals separated? You know your own stock?"

Hilton looked kindly at the other man.

"Mr. Jay, there's something you ought to learn," he said quietly. "There's a lot more to trading horses than just grabbing off a fat, exclusive government contract. For instance, a stockman cannot only tell you every horse he's ever owned and recognize the animal years later, but he can usually do the same with the beef he runs. It's something to remember."

"That mean something?" Barron Jay asked sharply.

Hilton nodded. "Sure," he agreed. "It means that I know every head in that bunch of mine. I'd know every head ten years from now—no matter what brand they were wearing—even if it was the cavalry brand. You and your boys had better be careful you don't make a mistake and sell some of my broomtails off to the Army before me and you have made us a deal."

Jay's hand fell away from Hilton's arm. Jim swung onto his dusty pony and jogged on down into the town. Beaver Creek was about what he had expected, a conglomeration of the old and the new. The original stage station still stood. The blatantly new railroad station sat in ugly bright paint in the fork of the Y which terminated this spur line into the valley. There were a number of weatherbeaten buildings and two big new warehouses utilized by tradesmen retailing the goods coming in by railroad to the scattered ranchers on the wide expanse of rich grass west and south.

THE flurry of activity induced by huge government purchases of saddle stock this spring was apparent. The Quartermaster's Corps had an office across from the hotel, and the two saloons had brightened up their fronts in anticipation of a share of the government money pouring into the valley. But, for the most part, Beaver Creek was a remote frontier settlement, complete with the idlers who frequented the remote places and the frontier for the anonynity they could find there.

As Jim Hilton swung down in front of the hotel, he eyed the men along the walk and decided that what Barron Jay lacked in knowledge of horse trading he made up in experience at this sort of thing. There could be no doubt that the man was running every head of riding stock he could find onto the government stock cars lined up at the siding with absolutely no regard for the actual ownership of the animals.

Complaints received at the Quartermaster General's office rested on firm foundation. The government was dealing with a thief. There was no other explanation for the number of Jay's men about this little town.

Hilton touched his lips with his tongue. This would not be the easiest assignment he had ever had. Not by quite a margin. As he pushed back the hotel register, he leaned confidentially toward the clerk.

"If a man was looking for a job of work and a drink at the same time, where would he go in this man's town?"

"Particular about the kind of work?" the clerk asked drily. Hilton shook his head. The clerk ran his eyes over him. They lingered for a moment on his belted gun. Finally he shrugged, "Try the Moose," he suggested. "Liquor's fair and most of Jay's crowd hangs out there."

"Jay?" Hilton repeated softly.

"Find out about Jay and his bunch yourself," the clerk returned guardedly. "I don't get my neck into any of that."

Jim left his saddle roll at the hotel desk and went out onto the street. He located the Moose on the opposite side, back in the direction of the rails and Barron Jay's corral. He saw a smaller place in the opposite direction. An old sign advertised it as the First Chance. It looked seedy. A place which bucked an outfit like Barron Jay's couldn't do much business in a town this small. Jim moved toward it. Before he had gone half a dozen paces, a man stepped out from between two buildings and fell in beside him. The fellow was ageless, shabby without being unkempt, and dressed in a style faintly reminiscent of a pulpit. He had little hair on his head, a fine red beard, and piercing, swiftly-shifting eyes. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"You took long enough getting here, Jim," he said. Hilton swore softly. The man beside him grinned. "You didn't expect Singin' Joe to overlook this kind of opportunity, did you, old friend?"

"What you specializing in this season, Joe—weddings, baptisms, or buryings?" Hilton asked sourly.

"Man, how you talk!" Singing Joe answered. "Since when has there been weddings or baptisms where Jim Hilton was working? Glad I beat you here. Wouldn't want to miss any business."

"You missed the trail someplace, Joe," Hilton said easily. "You've got it wrong. I'm on my own, this trip. Doing a little speculation in horses. Thought I might take a bite out of the government contract I heard Barron Jay was filling here at Beaver Creek."

"So you come all the way out from Fort Leavenworth to make a few iron men in horses?" Singing Joe scoffed. "Took a detour away up the Platte to make it look good, too. And you with a commission from the Quartermaster General's office to check into Jay's operations. I've got ways of learning things, Jim. I got friends in the Army at Fort Leavenworth. I'm going to do some business in this Beaver Creek. The Jay bunch has left so much deadwood lying around that you'll stumble into it in a hurry."

"You're going to get out of town before you get drunk and spill what you know, Joe," Hilton said evenly. "And I'll tell you something else—you're not going to have any friend at Leavenworth the next time you're back there. When I finish up here, I'm going to nose him out. This is supposed to be a confidential business of mine out here."

"Ain't it?" the man beside him asked innocently. "It's between friends. I'll prove it. Look, Jim, give me an idea of how many plantings there might be so's I can sort of warm up to the heirs and survivors beforehand, and I'll cut you in a little. Say five iron men a head, eh?"

"You've got an hour to fill your saddle, Joe," Hilton said inflexibly.

"DON'T get so damned hasty!" the man with the red beard warned. "Don't scorn a helping hand, boy. Give me time and I could find something in the Book on that for you. It ain't Godly and, what's to the point, it ain't smart. There have been three men come loping into this cross between an outhouse and the uninhabited badlands, each of them convinced Barron Jay is a first-class horse thief, bent on selling their stock to the government at his price. Maybe they'd have proved the point, too, if they could have got down to his corral and seen what

he was shipping out. But this little strip of dust they call a street here was too long for 'em. Didn't any of 'em have much cash in their jeans when I committed them to their Maker, but it's kept me eating till you got here. If Jay was to find out you were working for the Army—"

"All right, Joe," Jim said softly. "I'll buy you a drink."

The man with the red beard linked his arm in Jim's, grinning broadly. "Old friends are best, I always say," he chuckled. "Tell you what, Jim. You give me enough legitimate planting business and it won't cost you a cent extra to keep me quiet."

There had been talk along the river at one time and another that Joe Breen had once been an Army chaplain, although there was little about the man now to indicate this might have been the truth. He was a bottle bum, a drifter who cadged his way by unctuous Scriptural mouthings and an unbecoming saintliness of manner, but there were occasions when he rendered good service to a troubled man or woman and his native shrewdness made him both a dangerous and a helpful man. Jim Hilton had always more than half enjoyed him, a liking blended of amusement and pity. His first annoyance that Singing Joe Breen had gotten word of his business in Beaver Creek began to fade as they bellied up to the bar in the First Chance.

The cavalry office in charge of the Army purchasing commission in Beaver Creek didn't know Jim's errand here. Jim knew no one in the town. And it would not be easy for him to circulate in search of information without being closely watched by Jay's men. At the same time, the trap he had planned couldn't be sprung unless some circulating was done and proper bait thrown out. Jim waited patiently until Joe Breen was deep into his second drink.

"I'm feeding some stock in Jay's corral, Joe," he said.

Breen glanced quickly at him. "Army stock?"

"I told Jay it belonged to me—that I'd run it down from the upper Platte. No Army markings on it, anyways."

"Um . . ." Breen said thoughtfully. "Any markings at all on it?"

"Some," Jim admitted. "One brand and another."

"Lot of stock missing around here," Singing Joe said. "Work of the devil, verily. And you know me, Jim. Devoted to thwarting the devil, every waking hour. Absolutely. There'll be folks about that'll want to look at a strange bunch of horses wearing assorted brands. I know right where to find them."

Jim grinned, pulled a thin roll of bills from his pocket and peeled one off. It fluttered to the bar. Joe Breen made a startlingly swift pass with his hand and the bill disappeared.

"Remember, Joe," Hilton said steadily, "you don't know me. You don't know anything about Jim Hilton and the Quartermaster's Corps. All you know is that I claim the horses I ran into Jay's corral belong to me."

Breen tossed off the last of his drink, grinned quickly and slid out the door. Hilton glanced at two men huddled together at the foot of the bar. He thought they had been studying him. One of them broke from his companion and moved slowly up to Jim. His eyes made the same kind of study Barron Jay's had made. Finally he made an abrupt decision.

"Drifting? he asked.

"Trading," Jim corrected. "Brought some horses in. Heard Barron Jay was buying broomtails here."

The man scowled. "You're in the wrong saloon if you're a Jay man," he said. "The First Chance serves an honest trade—the grass trade. You better move on."

"Thanks," Jim said with a wry smile. "My mistake." He tossed another bill down on the bar and went out. On the street he glanced about. He saw that Joe Breen had appropriated his own horse and was making dust at the head of the street on his way out of town. Jim's grin widened. He swung along unhurriedly and turned in at the Moose bar. Jay was in the place. It was crowded. He thought the horse broker had passed the word and gathered his boys. There were half a dozen of them, saddle-leaned, uncommunicative and wary. He approached Jay.

"I'll listen to a new price on my

horses," he said, "when you get to it."

"There's a paint in that bunch," Jay said slowly. "Emmett, over there, says he's seen that horse before."

JIM glanced at the rider indicated, a thin, saturnine fellow with an almost foppishly light gun at his belt. Thirty-two caliber, maybe—too light for anything but rabbits—and men. And then only if its owner was sure enough of the placement of his shots.

Jim smiled. "I told you," he said to Jay. "A stockman can remember a horse."

"Yeah," the broker agreed. "But Emmett says that the last time he saw that paint it didn't belong to you."

Jim glanced again at Emmett. "How long has it been since you were up toward the headwaters of the Platte?" he asked.

"Ten, maybe fifteen years," Emmett answered.

Jim's smile widened. "Got a long memory, haven't you, Emmett?"

"Look here, Hilton," Barron Jay snapped, "the paint we're talking about isn't more than a four-year-old!"

Jim made a clucking sound with his tongue against his teeth.

"Something sure as hell doesn't fit, does it, Jay?" he asked. "Look, I'm turning in for a little shut-eye, up at the hotel. When you get your price on those broomtails of mine up to forty dollars a head, wake me up. I don't believe I would before then."

Turning, Jim walked unhurriedly out of the Moose, leaving behind uncertainly and distrust. This was the hard way, and he knew it. But he was alone, unless he wanted to count on Singing Joe Breen's professional interest in the outcome of this affair. He couldn't count on the cavalry men in the Army purchasing commission. Probably a stiff-backed lieutenant with maybe a sergeant and a couple of troopers. They'd require a lot of documentation to establish his identity, and when it was established they'd have the Army men's usual hostility toward a civilian outranking them in his own business. And one of them might talk—not purposefully, but in a grouch. So the best he could do was squeeze Barron Jay hard and hope the broker and his boys would break widely and in the right direction when the time came.

* * *

Hilton slept heavily. It was well after dark when a knock on his door roused him. Gun in hand, he unlocked it. Singing Joe slid into the room.

"Where'd you get those horses in Jay's corral?" Breen asked sharply.

"I told you—I drove them down from the top of the Platte."

"Something's damned funny, then," Joe muttered. "Seven men rode back into town with me. Boys off the closest of the ranches that have lost riding stock since Jay moved in here. Boys that have sold him some horses and lost track of a lot of a lot more they didn't get paid for. Six of them found one of their missing animals in that bunch of yours."

"The hell!" Jim said with polite interest.

"They're sore," Singing Joe added. "They're down to the First Chance, talking it over. How long's it been since you was last hanged, Jim?"

"Quite a spell," Jim admitted. "Why?"

"Because I hope you haven't forgot what it's like. I think those boys aim to whip themselves up a little necktie party—for you!"

"The marshal's office won't like that," Jim said drily.

"Neither will you!" Breen snapped. "See here, Jim. I slid in here to warn you because one planting won't pay my expenses and I'm looking for you to drum me up some real business. You going to lie there on that bed till those stockmen come after you?"

Jim reached for his boots. "No, Joe, I'm not," he said quietly. "Supposing you drop a hint in the First Chance that I could be found at Jay's corral in about ten minutes."

Singing Joe grinned with sudden relief, then sobered. With a flourish he produced a discolored bandanna and blew his nose loudly into it.

"The thought of committing sundry good men and true to their Maker affects me," he said sententiously. "Ah, the cruelties of life, the sublimeties of death. And confound you, Jim Hilton, watch your shooting! I don't want 'em winged; I want 'em dead. I never could bury a live man."

JIM grinned as Breen closed the door. A mild reputation had attached itself to him. The rapid increase in the size of the Army of the West had made it the target of a number of sharp operations and he had been kept busy, west of Leavenworth. In a number of cases he had been able to play his cards without violence. In others, he had not. And there were those like Singing Joe Breen who believed Jim Hilton could not be beaten with a gun. A healthy enough reputation for a man operating a long ways from the base of his authority, but nevertheless contrary to his duty. By oath he was a policeman, not an executioner. It was his job to bring men in, not plant them in prairie sod. And this was not always easy.

Shifting his badge from the lining of his vest to the front of his shirt, but where the vest would cover it until he was ready, Jim left his room. He went down the upper hall to stairs at the back which led down the exterior rear wall of the hotel. Keeping behind street-front buildings, he moved unhurriedly up toward Barron Jay's corral. Breen appeared to have traveled fast. A number of lanterns were hanging near the corral gate and a tight group of men were bunched there, Breen among them. The ranchers from Beaver Creek Valley, Jim thought. And they were obviously angry.

As he approached he became aware of another group of men, moving along the street, parallel to him. He heard Barron Jay's incisive voice and a low mutter of reply. With senses sharpening, Jim walked into the lamplight and one of the ranchers saw him.

"Here's the son!" the man sang out, and he crossed swiftly to within a couple of yards of Jim, the tail of his ragged jacket brushed out of the way of his gun. "We want to talk to you, Hilton!" he snapped. Jim nodded. He saw that Jay and his men had come up, halting a little apart from the ranchers in a little ell of the corral which offered some shelter from the brisk night wind buffeting the lamps. Jay was grinning widely.

"First off, Hilton," the rancher said, "you claim these horses are yours?"

"I tried to sell them to Jay, there," Jim answered.

"All right," the rancher went on. "Next question is—how'd you come by them?"

"What's it to you?" Hilton asked in a sharp voice.

"We can prove that thirty-eight of them were stolen, right here in this valley. And one stolen horse is enough to hang a gent on this man's grass!"

"If you can make your proof stick," Jim suggested.

"We can and we will, by hell! We've figured it was Barron Jay that was cleaning us out, buying some of our stuff by day and stealing the rest by night. We never thought about an independent sliding in to work a long loop and resell to Jay. It's gone far enough, Hilton. We're going to make our own law on this."

"And you'll stick to it?"

"You'll find out soon enough!" the stockman growled.

Jim tilted his head downward. "Then I reckon I better tell you where I got those horses," he said softly. "Remember, you're going to stick by this law of yours." He raised his head, his eyes full on Barron Jay. And at the same time he parted his vest so that his marshal's badge winked in the lamplight.

"Those horses," he went on calmly, "were delivered to me on the railroad, just out of Denver. They'd been shipped there from the U.S. Army at Fort Leavenworth. They're a bunch culled out of a couple of shipments the quartermaster received from Barron Jay at Beaver Creek—shipments on which the lieutenant in charge of the buying mission here had noted they had been loaded at night. Some of you have complained to the Army about Jay's operations. This is the way the Army decided to check up."

BEHIND the ranchers Jim saw Singing Joe Breen rubbing his hands together. He saw the ranchers faces go pale. Almost as a man they pivoted slowly toward Barron Jay and his crew.

The stock broker stared hard at Jim Hilton. He dampened his lips. "Hilton, you're playing it too pat," he said harshly. "You're lying!"

"I've got papers on me to prove I'm not," Jim said gently. "You're through here, Jay. Take it the easy way."

It was the smallest kind of a signal

which passed between Barron Jay and Emmett. A confirmation of something they had already decided upon themselves, perhaps. Maybe even a confidence. After all, this marshal had worked himself into a spot where he would pass very nicely for the thief who had been raiding the stock ranches—if he was dead and couldn't prove his charges.

Emmett was a good man with his little gun. Too good. He was clear of his holster and had a shot away before Jim could clearly see his draw. But like a good many men who are sure, he was a little too fast. Jim felt the burn of the howling little slug. He had no time for placement, himself. He flung one shot at Emmett, knew he hit the man, and lined on Jay as the broker leveled his own slower weapon. This was more careful. He hit Jay high in the shoulder, spilling him violently into the dust. Somewhere to his left, he heard Joe Breen howl angrily at the ranchers, "Show iron, damn you!"

The command must have been obeyed, for Jay's men, hunching forward, suddenly lifted hands innocently high. Hilton swung his glance in search of Emmett and found the man still on his feet. The little gun spoke twice again, swiftly and spitefully. A light, tugging blow pulled Jim partially around, making him loose his last shot from an awkward angle. Emmett coughed and bent forward, almost gently laying his gun in the dust. He tried to straighten, then sagged forward onto his face.

The ranchers moved forward. When he had lifted the last gun from the belts on Jay's men, Singing Joe Breen darted forward. He bent for a moment over Emmett's body, then rolled Jay onto his back. The broker swore at him. Breen swung away, seized Hilton's injured arm and glanced quickly at it.

"Damn it, Jim," he complained, "you've let me down! Jay's just pinked. So are you. And that other bucko's so tore up he ain't worth burying. You've cost me the stake I was figuring to make out of this."

Jim grinned thinly. "There's a train due in half an hour or so. You and the ranchers get Jay patched up so he won't bleed. And get pigging strings onto the rest of his bunch. They've all got a trip coming."

The rancher with his arms full of guns stopped in front of Jim. "What about those horses of ours in that corral?" he demanded.

"As United States marshal, I'm going to need deputies to get these prisoners to Leavenworth. Deputies travel at government expense. If I was to swear you boys in, when you got to Leavenworth you'd be able to go over every head Jay has shipped in. The Army won't knowingly deal in stolen goods and it'll go along with an honest citizen. When you've sorted out the ones Jay paid you for from the ones he didn't, the quartermaster will make up the difference to you. And another thing, there's not going to be another exclusive contract. From now on, you and your neighbors deal directly with the Army purchasing mission."

"That's cutting from a square deck, Hilton," one of the ranchers approved.

Jim nodded. The ranchers moved in on Jay's men. Two of them hoisted the broker to his feet. Jay yelped in exaggerated pain from his wound but received short sympathy. Jim grinned. These were good deputies. He thought there would be no more stolen stock in this basin. Joe Breen shuffled dourly over to him.

"I could have sold what I knew about you for a pretty penny, Jim," he accused. "I wish I had now. Half a dozen buryings would have set me up right."

"Joe," Hilton said, "you talk big. You wouldn't have sold me out. I know it. So you've got a job. I'm not going back to Leavenworth. There's a man we want supposed to be up in North Park. I'm going to have a look for him. You're going to boss this bunch back to the river. And a chief deputy draws six dollars a day."

Joe Breen sucked in his belly and shoved out his chest.

Hilton grinned. He flipped a clean kerchief from his pocket and held it out.

"Now, since you're working for me, Joe, get a cinch on this hole in my arm. I'm messing up my shirt."

"You hurt bad, Marshal?" Breen asked.

Jim shook his head. "Punctured a mite is all, Marshal," he laughed. "Horse-trading runs rough sometimes. . . ."

DANIEL MALLORY

1

Dan Mallory had as nice a collection of bullet, arrow, knife and hatchet scars as ever adorned one human body. An Army surgeon said, while extracting a Sharp's slug from Dan's shoulder during the Civil War, "This man is a national curio; he must be indestructible."

2

Dan started his collection in 1838, freighting for Sam Houston. In a terrific fight while crossing the Brazos, Mexican raiders wiped out most of Dan's companions, wounded him eleven times. But he brought the freight wagons safely through at a time when supplies meant life or death to Houston's plans.

3

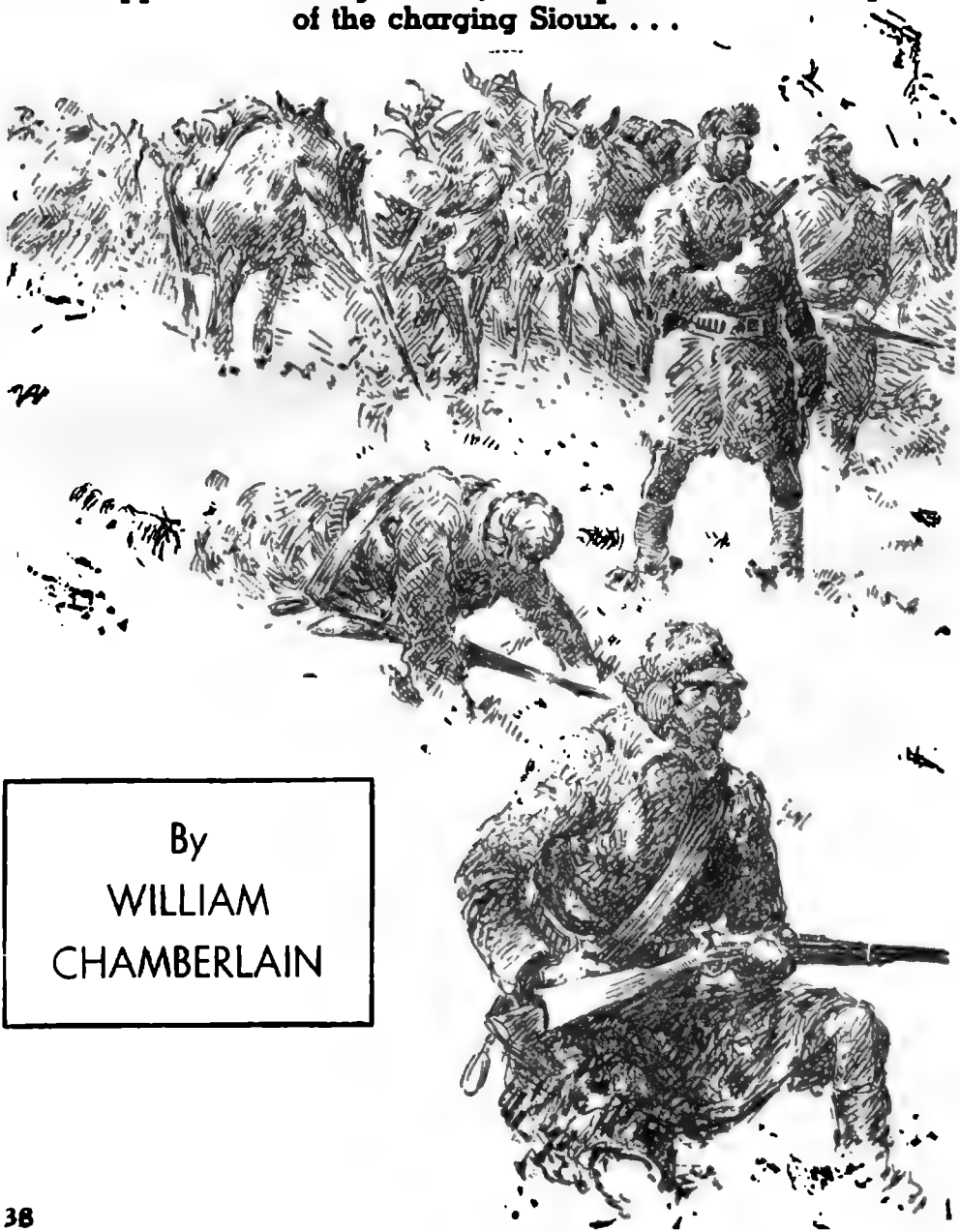
When the Lone Star was added to Old Glory, Mallory moved westward into New Mexico. There he met Kit Carson, and together they waged war against renegades and Indians. Later, Dan fought Mormon terrorists who burned Bents Fort. In California (1851-1860) he tried mining; pursued Murietta; worked for the Pony Express.

4

During the Civil War he served under Kit Carson, was wounded five times in that bitter struggle. In 1871 he was still fighting for law and order on the frontier with the Arizona Rangers. But hazardous living was taking its toll, and he died in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1873. Oddly enough, having dodged Death in scores of fights, he died in bed.

"MOUNT UP, YOU

"Gentlemen," the major said, "it is the nature of war that it cannot consider the individual. We are being counted on to crush these hostiles. A sharp attack may do it. A halting advance—hampered by wounded—cannot. . . ." So the cavalry moved out, leaving the crippled—including the major's only son—to the mercy of the charging Sioux. . . .



By
WILLIAM
CHAMBERLAIN

SONS OF GLORY!"

Dramatic Novelette of the Army of the Old West

CHAPTER ONE

Glory Joe

LIEUTENANT BATH HOWELL awoke a little before the bugle would start blowing reveille, moved up to four-thirty this morning. For a moment he lay there, relishing the comfort of his blankets a little longer while he listened to the wind shaking the window panes. A hell of a day on which to start a campaign, he thought angrily. That was the way whenever the War Department, in all of its stupidity, sent out one of these new brooms to sweep things clean.

The Sioux charge came—a howling band of riders boiling up the slope.

And, if the impressions of a month were worth anything, Major Ransome Ethelstan—the troopers were already calling him Glory Joe—was one of the worst of the new brooms.

The sound of the bugle broke into his reflections, the brassy notes drifting across the parade ground. They were clear and sharp and filled with a reluctant urgency

as Howell swung his feet to the rough, cold boards of the floor and felt his way across to light the oil lamp. It flickered in the draft and Howell saw that a fine dust of snow had drifted beneath the door—mute evidence that yesterday's promise of bad weather had come true. The calendar, tacked to the wall above the table, said that today was the 13th of December, 1876.

In the bunk across the room Roger Merritt stirred uneasily and damned the light in a voice still thick with sleep. Howell, busy with his own reflections while he dressed, paid no attention except to say, "Come. Stir out if you're going to move with the United States cavalry today."

Merritt grunted disgustedly. "I don't want to ride with the United States cavalry today. Tell Glory Joe I'm sick. Tell him that I've gone to St. Louis and got me a fat wife and I'm going to stay in bed with her while the rest of you go off chasing Indians if you can't think of anything better to do."

"Tell him yourself," Bath answered absently.

He pulled on iron hard boots and stood up, reaching for the blue tunic hung across the back of a home-made chair. He was a tall, lithe man in his early twenties with a face burned dark by wind and sun and with faint lines already marking the corners of his mouth and eyes. His fingers were stiff as he shrugged himself into the heavy buffalo coat, split down the tail for riding, and buckled his pistol belt around it.

"See you later," he said.

"I hope not," Roger Merritt said from the blankets. "The only person I want to see right now is that girl I left back in Memphis. I think her name was Mary, or something."

Bath Howell opened the door and the wind bit squarely at his face and swept on in to set the lamp to dancing. He pulled the door shut behind him, cutting off the sound of Merritt's curses, and then paused for a moment on the narrow porch of the log building while he looked across the darkness of the parade ground. Lights were yellow squares in the barracks windows and through the driving veil of the snow he saw lanterns winking like discouraged fireflies as they bobbed away toward the stables. The cold was intense.

It was fifty yards down the line to the squat building that served as officers' mess. Bath headed that way, ducking his chin against the wind. Major Ethelstan was already sitting at the head of the long table, coffee in front of him, as Bath came in. He nodded curtly without speaking and Bath felt his dislike for this small, handsome man burn in his stomach like the bitter taste of a hangover as he unbelted his buffalo coat and hung it on a peg against the wall.

He said, roughly, not caring whether the major liked it or not, "It's going to be a bitter day for riding, sir."

Major Ethelstan smiled bleakly beneath his small, trim mustache and glanced up sharply. There was a cold aloofness, a superiority about this man that Bath hated—that all of the rest of the squadron had learned to hate—since Ethelstan had come to command Fort Littlejohn. Oh, he had a fine enough record, Bath Howell thought sourly. Brevet-colonel who had ridden with Sheridan in the Valley; after the war aide-de-camp to the General of the Army; rich, accomplished, darling of Washington society. For the newspapers reached even to Fort Littlejohn in Dakota Territory.

AND now they had sent this mincing toe-dancer out here to command the squadron, as though fighting Sioux and Cheyennes had anything in common with chasing Jubal Early in the valley of Virginia. Sent Glory Joe out to show them how it should be done; sent him out in place of old Pop Anderson, invalided home after eleven years of Indian fighting. Well, the squadron had lost on *that* transaction! And now a campaign in the dead of winter and at a time when half the squadron was made up of raw recruits scarcely familiar with their mounts or arms yet.

Major Ethelstan's thin voice interrupted Bath's morose reflections. "Soldier weather," he was saying sharply. "You're not afraid of it, are you, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir," Bath answered shortly. "I'm not afraid of it. I've been out here four years now. I was thinking of the men; there's few enough of them that know how to take care of themselves in any weather,

let alone damnable weather like this."

Ethelstan smiled tightly beneath his mustache. "Then it's time they learned. A soldier does not wait on good weather when there's fighting to be done."

Captain Denmore, the adjutant, came in then, bringing snow with him, a tall, forlorn man with a drink-reddened face. He seated himself at the major's right and began to talk in jerky sentences while the major nodded impatiently. A Negro brought Howell hotcakes and jerky, stew and coffee, and the latter bent over his plate paying no attention to the conversation at the head of the table. After a little Lieutenant Gifford came in, slapping his hands together, and then Roger Merritt and gray-haired Captain de Pard and, after that, the half dozen other officers who would ride with the column.

They ate in silence and Bath was vaguely aware that he missed the cheerful banter that had marked the mess before Major Ethelstan had come. He was finishing his second cup of coffee when Adjutant Denmore rapped on the table and said in his querulous voice, "Attention, gentlemen. The commanding officer has a few remarks."

Major Ethelstan stood up at the head of the table, smoothing the new cloth of his tunic across slim hips. Posing, Bath thought sourly. Posing like this was a Washington tea party and the ladies were watching. Suddenly he wished with all his heart that Pop Anderson was leading the squadron this morning. A man needed confidence in his commander when he marched in weather like this. Major Ethelstan was waiting for a moment—a trick he had—while his black eyes moved deliberately across the faces of the men in front of him.

"This is not a council of war," he said abruptly. "I do not hold councils of war. I am well aware that you do not like me, that you resent my command of this squadron. Let me assure you that that fact is of no importance to me whatever."

"He loves this," Bath thought. "Little Napoleon telling his corporals where to get off."

"The thing that is important," Major Ethelstan was going on in his thin, harsh voice, "is that every able-bodied man and officer in this command is marching against the hostiles this morning. There will be no malingering and no excuses. I assure you that I'm quite capable of dealing drastically with any man who does not obey my orders implicitly—any man, I repeat, and it would not make any difference if it should happen to be my own brother."

HE PAUSED for a moment and his dark eyes flickered down the table toward Bath. "One of you has inferred that the weather is too bad to ride in," the major said then, and Bath felt the angry red begin to crawl up into his face. "Gentlemen, a soldier of my command rides in any weather. Are there any questions?"

There were none, no noise at all except for the scuff of the Negro's feet as he brought more coffee and the slat of the wind against the window. Major Ethelstan nodded curtly and went on out into the darkness, followed by his adjutant.

When he had gone Roger Merritt said, "And you children will all stay in after school if you don't learn your lessons," and thrust his big nose into his coffee mug.

Bath lingered for a moment after the others had gone. "Damn him!" he said bitterly. "I've got good enough reason not to trust him! My brother would be alive today if it hadn't been for one of these Glory Joes at Gettysburg! I know the breed!"

Merritt said, "I'll listen, Bath," but the latter took down his buffalo coat and went on out into the wind.

The first sergeant, a grim old man with a face like the weathered side of a hill, was waiting when Bath reached H Troop. The former saluted with the practiced ease of an old soldier and said that the men had eaten and that he had sent them to the stables to saddle, taking their rolls with them.

Bath nodded absently. "How many for duty this morning, Murtaugh?" he asked.

"Thirty-nine, sorr," the old man told him. "Elperson an' Queen still in hospital. Corpril Main, Rudabaugh an' Crowe detailed to stay as stockade guard. They're just after gettin' over the grippe, sorr, an' not fit for full duty anyway."

Bath asked suddenly, "What do you

think of this business in this weather, Sergeant?"

Sergeant Murtaugh eyed him with a wary look, then unbent the merest trifle, for Bath had commanded the troop for a year now and the men liked and trusted him. Two years, with seven days out of every ten spent in the saddle and God alone knew how many miles of trails and scouts and battles behind them.

"It is a bad day for a start, sorr," Sergeant Murtaugh said cautiously. "An' I'm thinkin' that there'll be empty saddles before ever we ride back into Fort Littlejohn again. For it's not only the Indians that the Army fights, beggin' the lieutenant's pardon, but it's the country, as well. An' the country can be wicked . . . wicked."

Bath nodded again. "Yes, wicked. Why is it that a man stays? What is it that keeps him out here at all?"

Murtaugh pondered that, pulling at the droop of his graying mustache. "I have asked the question of meself, sorr," he said finally. "I have not found a good answer. It's not for the pay, for God knows there is little of that. An' it's not for the glory, for of that there is even less. Maybe it's for the troop an' for the man who rides next to you in the column. Or maybe it's for the sight of the hills turnin' green in the spring. I don't know. I just don't know."

"Maybe," Bath said. Then, abruptly: "Or maybe it's because we are fools, Murtaugh. There are other ways that a man can live. How is the recruit, Everest, coming on?"

"Fair, fair," Sergeant Murtaugh murmured. "He tries, sorr, but he's little more than a baby—an' this is no place for a baby. It would be better if he had been left on stockade guard, I'm thinkin'."

"I asked permission to leave him behind. I was told that every able-bodied man would march," Bath said bitterly. "Keep an eye on him, Murtaugh."

A faint grayness was beginning to show in the east as Howell went on out through the door. It was a half hour later when the bugle shrilled the order to mount and the column turned through the gate of Fort Littlejohn and swung northeast toward the bleak upper reaches of the Gray Feather.

CHAPTER TWO

Arrest

THEY halted that night in the shelter of a wind-swept ridge which lifted from the forks of the river. Men made coffee in the scanty shelter of the trees and fried bacon and cooked bannocks. The smoke of the fires was a pungent and pleasant thing against the growing darkness. The snow had stopped at midday but, as Bath moved among the little groups of H Troop checking the men, he could smell more snow coming on the wind. He shook his head and swore fretfully. The going was already bad.

He found young Everest crouched in the lee of a little outcrop and paused for a moment beside the boy. Not more than sixteen; seventeen at the most and with all of a boy's awkwardness and uncertainty. Bath damned Major Ethelstan in his heart and wished that he had left young Everest behind, orders or no orders.

"How's it going, son?" he asked.

The boy started to stand but Bath motioned him back. "All right, sir," Everest said. "It's awful cold though, Lieutenant. Awful cold."

Bath grinned at him and said, "You'll get used to it," with a cheerfulness that he did not feel as he went on, adding the recruiting sergeant who had enlisted that kid to his list of the damned.

He finished his inspection presently and retraced his steps to where Roger Merritt was cooking bacon over a little fire. Lash Ferguson, the civilian scout, squatted on his heels, his stubby pipe in his mouth, his hands held out to the fire as Bath came up. He nodded dourly to Bath.

Bath grunted, "We've come through today all right. No telling how many more days we'll come through if this weather holds though."

Ferguson removed his pipe and spat. "More snow tonight," he said. "Plenty cold after that."

Bath nodded. "I can smell it. Where in hell is this Sioux village that we're looking for, Scotty? Nobody's told us yet."

"Four more marches, near as I can figure," the scout grunted. "Maybe five. The Crows say it's Buffalo Hump's vil-

lage. Couple hundred lodges somewhere near the headwaters of the Feather."

Roger Merritt poked at the frying bacon, the firelight making a ruddy glow on his round face. "I knew that I should have married that gal that owned the brewery," he said mournfully. "Right now I'd be—"

Bath suddenly slapped the snow angrily from a knee. "My God!" he said harshly. "The man must be crazy—stark, raving mad! A two hundred mile march in this weather with recruits who don't even know how to blow their own noses yet! And a hell of a fight at the end of it, if I know anything about Buffalo Hump. It's throwing men's lives away, I tell you! And for what? Because it's necessary to make a winter campaign against the Sioux? Not at all! Because Glory Joe wants to go back to Washington and strut up and down while the ladies simper at him and the newspapers write about what a great soldier he is! I tell you it's enough to make a man puke!"

Feet suddenly scuffed in the snow outside the circle of firelight and a dry, dispassionate voice said, "That's twice today I've heard you complain of this expedition, Lieutenant. I take it you've little stomach for meeting the hostiles. You are under arrest, sir."

BATH and Roger Merritt had gotten to their feet but Ferguson continued to squat, staring stolidly into the fire. Major Ethelstan's face was bright and hard and there was no mirth in the smile which twisted his lips as he came on into the firelight.

Bath asked in a flat, even voice, "And may I ask the major just what I'm charged with?" Howell was excited and worried.

"You may," Ethelstan said coldly. "Insubordination and cowardice in the face of the enemy."

For a moment black rage tore at Bath and, without his willing it, his right hand dropped toward the gun at his hip. Major Ethelstan came closer, his own hands motionless at his sides. The man was no coward, Bath thought with a grudging admiration as he fought his temper back under control; or else he was a fool, for he would never be any nearer to his death than he had been those few seconds ago.

Major Ethelstan went on, his voice devoid of emotion, "Lieutenant Merritt, you will take command of the troop. Do you understand, sir?"

Roger Merritt said sullenly, "Yes, sir. I understand," and saluted as the major turned away with his tight little smile on his face. As he disappeared into the night, Bath felt the wet fingers of new snow begin to brush against his cheek.

"The louse! The dirty, crawling little louse!" Roger Merritt said under his breath. "Maybe I'm in command but you're still giving the orders, Bath. The dirty, dirty louse!"

It was still dark in the scanty fringe of the trees as they saddled and rode out the next morning. Wind, wet with snowflakes, blew out of the northwest with a steady *whoosh*, numbing fingers and blueing nose and lips. As dawn broke Bath saw that ahead the snow lay smoothly white across the slopes of the ridges, broken here and there by the dark, somber clumps of the firs. Beside the trail the river was gray and unfriendly between its ice-jewelled banks except where it broke into brawling turbulence against boulders

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fallen from the walls above. There was no talk and no laughter as the column moved out.

Bath Howell rode back along a column presently, scrutinizing each trooper and each horse as he went. The men glanced at him covertly as he passed, for the word had already spread, and he sensed that something of his own anger toward Major Ethlestan moved the older men. Once, during a halt, Sergeant Murtaugh put a little of it into cautious words.

"You're goin' to stay with the outfit till we get back to Fort Littlejohn, ain't you, sorr?"

Bath nodded. He supposed so, he said, and Sergeant Murtaugh's mouth relaxed a little. "The bhoys will be glad, sorr," he said and moved his glance back until it rested between his horse's ears.

Bath Howell appreciated it.

The day crawled on to its cheerless close and the squadron camped that night in a flat where willows lifted leafless skeletons above the junction of Gunsight Creek and the Gray Feather. Indian country ahead, Bath knew; a blank, desolate tangle of canyons where anything could happen. He and Roger didn't talk that night as they huddled about their fire. One of the pack mules had gone lame during the day's march and a half dozen troopers were suffering from frostbite.

A SENSE of oppression rode with Bath through the afternoon of the fourth day—a thing he could not lay his fingers on which kept warning of trouble ahead. The column left the Gray Feather and crossed a low ridge and then wound on down into broken, barren country which stretched bleakly ahead. At four o'clock the order came to halt. Then the bugler came walking his horse back to tell the troop commanders that the squadron would start a night march at seven and that Major Ethelstan would hold an officers' call in ten minutes.

"Going to tell us how he licked Jubal Early, I bet," Roger Merritt grunted. "Or maybe he's going to put me in arrest now."

The major stood in the snow, sheltered a little from the wind as Roger and Bath came up. The other officers were already there, shuffling their feet a little uneasily in the snow and avoiding one another's glances. They, too, showed signs of the strain of the march; eyes were a little too bright, hand movements too sharp and jerky. Major Ethelstan—and the scout, Lash Ferguson—alone looked just the same. For a moment the major's eyes lighted on Bath and the latter thought that he was going to be peremptorily ordered away from the conference because of his arrest. He would, he decided, refuse to go. This thing had gotten beyond the point where individuals were involved. It meant the troop, and he intended to see that the troop had its chance and to hell with Major Ransome Ethelstan.

Then, however, the major's glance swung impersonally away and his stiff voice was lashing out at them against the wind. "Our Crow scouts have located Buffalo Hump's village in a small valley which, they tell me, opens out of the canyon some twelve miles ahead. Captain de Pard, you will take F and E Troops on a circuit along the rim and strike the hostile village from the rear. It is not likely that they've got warning of our coming. I will attack with the rest of the squadron as soon as I hear you open fire, blocking off their retreat. It is the same tactic that we used at Fisher's Hill in the Valley."

Captain de Pard looked doubtful and shook his gray head almost imperceptively. "Sir," he said, "I've fought Buffalo Hump before and he's a good soldier. It's not likely we'll catch him asleep. I respectfully recommend against splitting the command."

Major Ethelstan swung a voice on him that was as blunt as a club and Bath saw the others stiffen a little as they stood there in the dying afternoon. "I have told you before that I do not hold councils of war, Captain. I did not call you here to listen to opinions. I called you here to give you orders. Is that understood?"

Captain de Pard's face turned a deeper red than the cold warranted but he persisted stubbornly, "I still think that splitting the squadron is a dangerous thing. At Painted Wells last year—"

Major Ethelstan stopped him with a quick lift of his hand. "Captain de Pard," he said, "I have had all of the temporizing and the excuses from this command that I care to have. You've got your orders,

sir. Execute them! I'll take the responsibility!"

Temper flared in Bath like match-touched powder. This upstart telling Captain de Pard how to fight the Sioux! He pushed himself farther into the circle until he was standing directly in front of Major Ethelstan.

"Major," he said, "you're new to this country—new to the kind of fighting that goes on out here. For God's sake, listen to Captain de Pard on this! Buffalo Hump took upward of five hundred braves into the hills with him at the end of the summer and they're—"

Lash Ferguson shuffled into the edge of the circle. "He's got upwards of five hundred with him now," he said with a flat finality. "Little Bear's band joined him a week ago."

"How do you know?" Ethelstan asked.

The scout spat and ran his hands down the sides of his worn overcoat. "I got ways of findin' out," he said curtly. "That's what I'm here for, ain't it?"

Major Ethelstan shrugged his shoulders impatiently and his smile became thinner and more set under the dark line of his mustache. "Five hundred or five thousand," he said. "It makes no difference. The orders stand. I haven't marched this command for two hundred miles just to go back and report that the hostiles were too strong to attack."

"No, by God!" Bath suddenly yelled at him. "You've got to be Glory Joe, haven't you? Maybe you remember Hollo-way Run at Gettysburg, Major Ransome Ethelstan! My brother died there because some colonel—a colonel then—sent his regiment in on a mission that had no sense and no reason and was suicidal from the start! Maybe you'll tell us the name of that colonel, Major Ethelstan!"

There was a tiredness which had come over the major's face as he stood there looking at them with his feet spraddled a little in the snow. "Yes," he said, looking at each of them with the way that he had. "I was the one who ordered that charge."

"And did *you* go with your regiment?" Bath shouted. "Did *you* make that charge, too, when you knew that it was sheer suicide to go up against those Rebel guns?"

"No," Major Ethelstan said curtly. "No, I did not make it. Are there any more questions? Then we march at seven, gentlemen."

As he stumbled through the snow back to the troop, Bath's mind was a jumble of conflicting impressions. The dislike which he bore the slight man who had stood back there in the shelter of the rocks was no less, but the contempt was gone. Fool he might be, but Ethelstan was no coward, Bath thought. He was a soldier—and a man who stood alone here in the dusk with the weight of men's lives weighing upon his shoulders.

Sergeant Murtaugh was waiting as Bath came up. "The grain is gettin' low, sorr," he said, "but I have ordered a full feed. I'm thinkin' that we'll see action soon."

"Yes," Bath said. "I think soon."

CHAPTER THREE

Blood Is Thicker—

IT WAS a little after four in the morning when H Troop crossed the shoulder of a low ridge where the canyon began to open into a valley ramparted by the hills. The low order was passed down the column to dismount and form a skirmish line. Bath left his horse-holders in a clump of timber fifty yards to the rear while he and Sergeant Murtaugh moved forward to check the position. Merritt had gone on across the shallow creek to where G Troop was deploying—the major was over there and had sent for him.

It was quiet, too quiet, Howell thought. There was an uneasy quality to the morning. The wind had turned cold so that snow crystals crackled and hissed as the men moved about, stamping their feet cautiously to keep circulation up in numbed toes. Bath passed young Everest, coughing and crouched in the snow, and Bath paused to say a word to the boy. The latter mumbled and shook his head, saying he was all right, and Bath passed on, feeling older and more tired than he had felt before.

He went on back to the center of the line. Sergeant Murtaugh was there, crouching in the shelter of the rocks where the wind bit less. He said, "There's a smell of smoke in the air, sorr, an' once I thought I heard a dog bark up there."

Bath listened, shaking his head to drive away the sleep which was pressing against his eyelids. Then he heard the far-away but unmistakable quarreling of dogs. He knew Sergeant Murtaugh had heard it plainly enough; his question had been the old soldier's way of calling it to the attention of his officer without embarrassment. God above, Bath thought, what would we do without men like Sergeant Murtaugh —and they send us an Ethelstan!

He said, "Better see to the horses, Sergeant. I think that we'll be moving soon."

Sergeant Murtaugh's, "Yes, sorr," was as dry and precise as the sound of his boots cruching away in the snow.

Roger Merritt came then in the dawn with his eyes red-veined from lack of sleep and began to say, "Damn his crazy soul! He means to order a charge without waiting for Captain de Pard and—" That was as far as he got as the morning exploded into gunfire from off the canyon walls.

A man yelled from the left of the line, "My God, here them devils come—hundreds of 'em!"

Bath heard something thud soddenly close to him as Roger Merritt dropped to his knees, trying to say words that would not come out of his throat.

Acrid powdersmoke drifted above the bare willows which infested the mouth of the valley in front and Bath suddenly made out the ghostly shape of Sioux riders as they came plunging in, zig-zagging their horses among the boulders which littered the valley floor. A wicked, plunging fire spattered lead and arrows into the middle of the troop from the canyon walls above and the gray of the morning was torn wide by a steady caterwauling of sound.

Sergeant Murtaugh came running from the horse lines and Bath yelled to him above the steady crash of the musketry. "Get the men back to the shelter of the trees. I'll take the left of the line!"

He knelt for a moment beside Roger Merritt; swore tonelessly as he saw that the latter was dead, and then ran on heavily toward where Sergeant O'Hearn's squad on the left was firing with crazy, disorganized haste. Bath yelled and waved his right arm and presently the firing steadied and he saw men begin to drop back toward the timber in a semblance of order. He heard Sergeant Murtaugh at the other end of the line lifting his voice above the racket in the canyon.

"Take it easy! Take it easy an' make your shots count! Don't mind the hollerin' none, it won't hurt you!"

MAJOR ETHELSTAN came then, floundering through the snow, Adjutant Denmore behind him. There was a trickle of blood across the major's face from a deep scratch but his eyes were as bright, hard and emotionless as ever, Bath noted. The crotch of his right hand was powder-blackened from the discharges of his pistol.

"Where's Merritt?" he rasped.

"Dead," Bath told him, shouting to make himself heard. "I'm moving the troop back to the shelter of the timber."

Major Ethelstan nodded, his eyes surveying the terrain with a swift, practiced comprehension. He said over his shoulder to Denmore, "Find Captain Hodge. Tell him to bring G Troop across the creek and form on the right of H. And move, Captain!"

Denmore went at a shambling run and Bath noted absently how the grossness had gone out of the man's face, leaving it red and pinched. A dozen feet away young Everest fired out into the murk and then got to his knees, turning his face back as Sergeant Murtaugh yelled again, "Take it easy! Take it easy!"

Major Ethelstan had been looking straight at the boy as he turned and Bath saw a startled expression cross the former's face. "Who is that?" he asked tightly.

"Trooper Everest," Bath said. "A recruit." Then he was waving his arm with quick urgence as the bullets bit into the snow. "Go on back!" he yelled. "Back to the trees, man!"

The boy got to his feet and went loping clumsily by, hampered by the buffalo coat which was too large for him. As he passed the major he half hesitated; then he smiled half apologetically and went on. Bath heard Major Ethelstan swearing under his breath. Odd, he thought. He had never heard the major swear before.

He said heavily, "We'd better get back

to the timber, sir. They'll really rush us in a minute."

The Sioux charge came a little later—a howling band of riders boiling up the slope toward the narrow pass while the fire quickened from above. Bath knelt on one knee, pistol jumping against his hand while the acrid smell of burned powder caught at his nostrils. Off to the left he heard a sergeant calling, "Fire slow, damn you! Fire slow or you'll wish, by God, you were back on the sidewalks of New York again!"

In front of Bath a trooper leaped to his feet, clutching at his shoulder while a scared, surprised look spread across his face. It was young Everest and Bath yelled to him to get down. But it was too late. A rifle *spanged* from the rim above and the boy doubled over; by the time Bath reached him his face was a dirty gray and he was holding a hand to the pit of his stomach.

"Easy, easy," Bath said. "You'll be all right, son."

Young Everest tried to smile. "Yes, sir," he said, coughing a little. "Only don't tell . . . my—the major, sir."

Bath suddenly knew the answer to something that had been vaguely puzzling him for the past two days. He asked slowly, "He's—the major's your father, isn't he, boy?"

Young Everest's eyes lighted and Bath —a hard man—felt his throat tighten at the pride he saw there. "Yes, sir," the boy said. "But I wouldn't want to bother him now. . . ."

Bath went back down the line after a moment, stumbling as he ran and yelling angrily at the men to keep down. "Damn!" he was thinking. "Oh, damn, damn! They're like children. They don't know what to do." He wondered if Captain de Pard would come.

BY TEN in the morning the two troops had been pressed back into a tight little circle around the top of the knoll. Bath, called back to where Major Ethelstan waited, listened to Adjutant Denmore's report. For the moment the Sioux fire had slackened but he saw the moving lance tips of riders a half mile across the valley where Buffalo Hump and his braves were reforming. They would come on again presently.

Captain Denmore was saying in a monotonous voice, "Seven killed, nine wounded in G Troop. Forty per cent. Five killed, ten wounded in H. Forty per cent. Ammunition—maybe sixty rounds left, sir."

Major Ethelstan received the report with no change of expression but Bath noted that his face was gray and drawn and he seemed to be holding himself erect with an effort. His right arm swung

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IRON BARS FOR THE WHISTLER

Here's sasparilla-drinkin', twin-gun Willy Wooten again—at his salty, hell-raising best in a thrill-packed yarn of the Old Southwest. . . .

By William R. Cox

TOO TOUGH TO TAKE

John Jo Carpenter's Smashing Novelette of a Gun-Shark's Destiny

* * *

AND stirring Western fiction by Tom W. Blackburn, Cliff M. Bisbee, Joseph Chadwick and others—in the big April issue.

10 STORY WESTERN 15c **MAGAZINE**

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limply at his side and he held his revolver in his left hand. Then he said with no particular expression in his voice, "It appears probable that Captain de Pard has run into trouble . . . a risk I took. It is not likely that he will come now. Therefore we will have to do the job without him."

A deadly tiredness had spread over Bath Howell and, at first, the major's words had no particular meaning. They were just sounds, like the *spang* of the rifles up there on the rim. Then the major was going on, speaking more slowly now, and the meaning of what he was saying began to beat at Bath's consciousness.

"We will attack at once. In line. G on the right. H on the left. Get your men mounted. Every man that can ride."

There was a thin, shocked silence for a moment. Then Captain Hodge, of G Troop, asked hoarsely, "What about the badly wounded, sir? There are five of my men that can't be moved."

"They must be left behind."

The flat, detached tone of the man cut at Bath like a knife. He tried to keep the shock out of his voice as he demanded, "Good God, sir, you can't mean that! Those devils behind us on the cliffs will be down here before we've gone a hundred yards, down among the wounded! Have you ever seen a man after they've finished with him?"

Major Ethelstan turned his head in a gesture that was weary. "Gentlemen, it is the nature of war that it cannot consider the individual. It is the end that matters. I am sorry that that should be so, but so it is." His voice was slower now as he looked at each one of them. "We are being counted on to crush this band of hostiles. A sharp attack may do it. A halting advance, hampered by wounded, cannot. It will be as I have said."

"And," Bath said between his teeth, "suppose that I should tell you, Major Ethelstan, that your son is one of those wounded you're leaving behind!"

Howell heard the startled catch of breath of the other officers; then, for the second time that day, he saw the veil of reserve drop from before the major's eyes. Almost against his will he caught a glimpse of the loneliness there, the profound loneliness of a man who must walk apart because he commands.

"The orders still stand," Ethelstan said evenly. "You may move out, gentlemen."

They moved away slowly, faces shocked and uncertain. Bath paused for a moment, turned away and then swung back suddenly as he saw Major Ethelstan crumple in the snow. The other officers crowded back as Bath dropped on one knee. There had been no sound of a shot.

"What's the matter, sir? Are you hit?"

"Nothing. Nothing," the major mumbled. Then Bath got the big buffalo coat open and they saw the spreading dark stain down the side of the new blue tunic and they understood and were silent.

"This didn't just happen," Bath said hoarsely. "You knew . . . it was before you gave the order about the wounded, sir!"

Some of the impassiveness had come back into the major's gray face. "I told you that the individual doesn't count, Lieutenant," he said. "This campaign is just a small part of a plan which will crush the hostiles and bring peace and safety to those who come after us. Captain Hodge."

"Yes, sir," Captain Hodge said huskily. His eyes were steady.

"Take command. Your attack must start at once."

They moved out five minutes later and the troopers, looking back over their shoulders with tight faces, saw Major Ethelstan propped there with his back against a rock, his revolver in his left hand, the rest of the wounded grouped near. One of the men called suddenly in a high, frightened voice, "Come back! Don't leave me!"

Then Bath heard Major Ethelstan, his voice lifting full and clear against the gray morning. "Take it easy, son. You're not staying here alone. We're staying here together."

Tears blinded Bath Howell as he drove his spurs into his horse and sent him across the flat at a savage run. Behind him he heard the tight-lipped curses of his men, recruits no longer but soldiers now. And he knew that they would smash the hostiles this day. . . . Glory Joe would be remembered. . . .

THE END

TOUGH MAN TO TAME

By

C. WILLIAM HARRISON

If they had seared him with the unjust brand of outlaw, well, then, young Clovis reckoned, he'd damn' well have the game as well as the name, even though his first chore on the tragic gallows trail would turn the guts of the most hardened killer. . . .

ONCE out of the chaparral Lew Clovis turned his horse northward into the foothills, no longer watching his backtrail. He climbed steadily through the greasewood and in early afternoon rode into the throat of Gunsight Pass.

The outlaws' tracks were there, just as he had known they would be, and Clovis smiled with grim satisfaction. From now on the going would not be so tough, and in him was a bitter certainty of decision:

"Just take it easy and nobody'll get hurt," Clovis said

if he was to be saddled with the unjust reputation of outlaw, then he would earn that reputation.

The trail of the outlaws led through the pass and dropped to the bench overlooking the pitted wastes of the Diablo desert. Late that afternoon, when the last colors of day were fading, Clovis saw the whisp of a campfire's smoke curling out of the boulders that footed the bench slope, and he no longer attempted to dog the trail of the outlaws. He cut straight down the barren slope to the boulder field, and at early darkness first heard the murmur of voices from beyond the rocks ahead.

Lew Clovis dismounted and snugged the reins of his horse around a mesquite spear. He pulled his gun and thought: this has been easy. But then there was no reason why it should not have been easy. A man whose father had been hanged as an outlaw learned to think like an outlaw. He learned all the tricks of the profession. He had the sharpness of perception and the skill and cunning of a hunted man.

Clovis lifted his gun level and moved forward silently through the shadows. Rounding the shoulder of the boulder, he paused, watching the two men by the campfire with hard, mocking eyes.

They squatted over a flat shelf of rock, and the money was there between them, emptied out of the canvas sack. The short man with the smooth, lean face and the pushed-back hat said in a dry, satisfied voice, "Fourteen thousand dollars—it's a lot of money."

The other man was tall and heavy, with a graying shock of thick hair and a long mouth above the hard shelf of his jaw. He nodded his big head slowly.

"A lot of money, Frank, and getting it was a good day's work. But it was tough that bank cashier had to be killed."

"Yes," Lew Clovis said. "Tough."

The two men came to their feet, startled, and turned. Their hands whipped down to holstered weapons, then froze.

Clovis laughed softly. "That's it, boys—just take it easy and nobody'll get hurt. I didn't come here to make trouble. I figured you might need another hand in this business. My name is Lew Clovis."

The big man straightened, surprise striking the hard planes of his face. "Blackjack Clovis—"

Lew Clovis' smile was thin and bitter. "I'm Blackjack's son." He studied the two men with narrowed eyes, then slowly sheathed his gun. He laughed with low mockery. "That trick you pulled of heading south after robbing the Hazardville bank, and then doubling back, was an old one. You fooled one posse, but you didn't fool me."

The small man's mouth dropped open. The big man said, "Shut up, Frank."

He looked at Clovis with hard eyes, "Just what are you driving at, Clovis?"

Clovis moved to the edge of the fire, a tall youth with dark eyes and a bitter twist to the set of his mouth.

"When you clipped that bank I was in town. You killed the cashier, and the town wasn't in any mood to ask questions. Someone recognized me as Clovis' son, and they jumped to the conclusion that I was in on your job. It's not the first time I've been saddled with my dad's reputation. I had to run for it. Only this time I made up my mind that if I was going to be called an outlaw, by God, I'd be one. I came here to join up with you."

The big man's mouth twisted and he motioned with one hand. "And try to get a cut in that money?" I suppose?

"I don't want anything I didn't earn!" Clovis snapped. "You missed a bet when you hit that bank today, mister. If you'd moved half an hour earlier you'd have had five thousand more in that pile. I watched a man walk out of the bank with five thousand dollars cash, and I know where to find him. It'll be an easy take, and a two hour ride will pull it off. This will be my trick, and maybe it'll set you straight about me."

THEY cut back through the pass, Lew Clovis riding in the lead. Complete darkness had set in; a wide field of stars was overhead, but no moon.

They dropped down the south slope of the ridge and angled across the valley toward the humped back of a mountain. In the distance across the flats they saw the gleaming freckles of light that marked the town of Hazardville. Lights that always before had appeared warm and friendly, but after this night would be cold and hostile.

Lew Clovis rolled a cigarette and lit it,

but the smoke was flat and tasteless in his mouth. This was the fork in the road, and he knew it. After this night all the trails he rode would be the same—the lost trails that would snake through the chaparral and badlands. Night rides, because a hunted man could not chance the daylight. Riding with a wary eye on every man he met because all honest men would be enemies and no other outlaw could be trusted completely.

They halted near the base of the mountain, and on the yonder slope was a window-lighted cabin with a mine's gallows frame just beyond, its skeletal framework etched black against the night sky.

Clovis said flatly, "He's got a shoestring copper mine, and he borrowed on it to the hilt so he could sink another shaft. He'll have the five thousand with him in that cabin."

The two men moved their horses up to Clovis' side. They looked at the cabin and said nothing. The big man struck a match to his cigarette, cupping the flame in his hand, and the glow cast shadows across his face.

"You sure you want to pull this off, kid?"

Clovis jerked his head around. "Why not?" he said harshly. "I've got nothing to lose. Every job I've had I've lost when someone found out who my father was. Every man I've met has watched me like I was planning to put a slug in his back. I don't stand to lose a thing."

The match flame died out and the big man's features faded into the darkness. "It's a big jump you're goin' to take."

"Not as big as you think. I already got the reputation. All I need to do is earn it." He laughed sneeringly. "Who are you to do all the preaching? You're packing bank money in your saddlebag, and you killed a man to get it."

The big rider took the cigarette from his mouth, looked at it. "Yes." He pinched the life out of the cigarette and looked at Frank. He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "You never forget the money you steal, and you never forget a man you've killed."

"Damn you, stop preaching!"

"All right, boy."

They left their horses in a shallow draw, circled the mound of waste rock that had been dumped out of the open mouth of the mine and approached the cabin cautiously.

Lew Clovis knew this place for what it was. It was a poor man's claim, with a shaft that had been sunk by one man's muscle-breaking efforts. A shoestring outfit. The ore which was brought up was sold to buy provisions for the old man and his wife. And when the mother vein was located the old man had mortgaged his claim to the hilt, at a cut-throat rate of interest, so that he could finance the development of his mine.

They drew near the cabin, and Clovis turned impatiently toward the door. The big man's hand reached out and halted him.

"Not so fast, kid. You don't get much out of this business, and half of the fun is making a man crawl before you take his money. We've got plenty of time. Let's watch the old duck a while before you take his roll."

The window was small, and below it was a tiny bed of flowers struggling in the dead brown earth. A frayed curtain, as clean as the first fall of snow, was across the window, and through it they looked into the cabin.

She was a thin, gray woman with a tired

face and patient eyes. She spoke slowly, the voice of a woman who has worked too hard and received too little.

"You shouldn't have done it, pa. All that money—you'll never be able to pay it back."

The man at the table was gaunt and stooped, with the money clenched in his labor-hardened hands. He looked up at his wife and smiled gently.

"Now don't fret, mother. Workin' alone I couldn't bring up more than enough ore to pay expenses. Not enough to get you the things you need."

"It ain't as if I was complainin' any, Sam."

"I know, I know. But a man likes to do things for his wife. Forty years you've been married to me, and all that time you've had to scrimp and save."

"You hush that talk, pa."

The big man beside Clovis chuckled softly. "Listen to that, kid. This is worth the ride to hear. Wait until you see him crawl when you shove your gun in his belly and take that money."

Clovis jerked his head, his mouth twisted and hard.

THE old man inside the cabin was saying, "I want you to have a home, just like other folks, mother. Maybe we can't get a big home, but one that's clean and has a good well. With this money I can buy powder and a new hoist. I can hire a couple men to help me clean out that pocket. I figure if we're lucky we might have a few thousand for ourselves after I pay back the loan. It won't be much, but it'll be enough to get you a few things I never could buy you before."

The big man touched Lew Clovis' arm. "Now's the time, kid! This is your trick, so do it up right."

Clovis pulled away from the big man, turned toward the cabin door.

"Shove the gun in his belly, kid, but don't take any chances. Drill him if you have to. We'll cover you from here while you get the money."

Lew Clovis reached for his gun, and lifted it. Then he spun and pushed his weapon toward the two men by the cabin window. Anger drew taut the lines of his face.

"Don't try anything," he said softly. "Don't try anything at all. I've kind of changed my mind about a few things. I'd rather have my dad's outlaw reputation than that old man's money. Start toward your horses, both of you, and don't try anything."

He followed them, balanced and wary in his movements. He held them back with the threat of his gun while he lifted the saddlebag from the big man's horse. The small man, Frank, turned his body and held it there rigidly, with his hand just above his gun.

"Damn it, Jeff—"

"Take it easy, Frank."

Clovis backed away to his waiting mount. "Now shuck your guns and see how far you can throw them. A posse will catch up with you one of these days, and you've already done more than your share of killing."

He swung into his saddle, with his eyes grim and watchful. "This money," he said softly, "will be mailed back to the bank just as soon as I can get to a town. I'm glad to have met you, boys. You'll never know how glad." And he sent his horse off into the night in a hard, racketing run. . . .

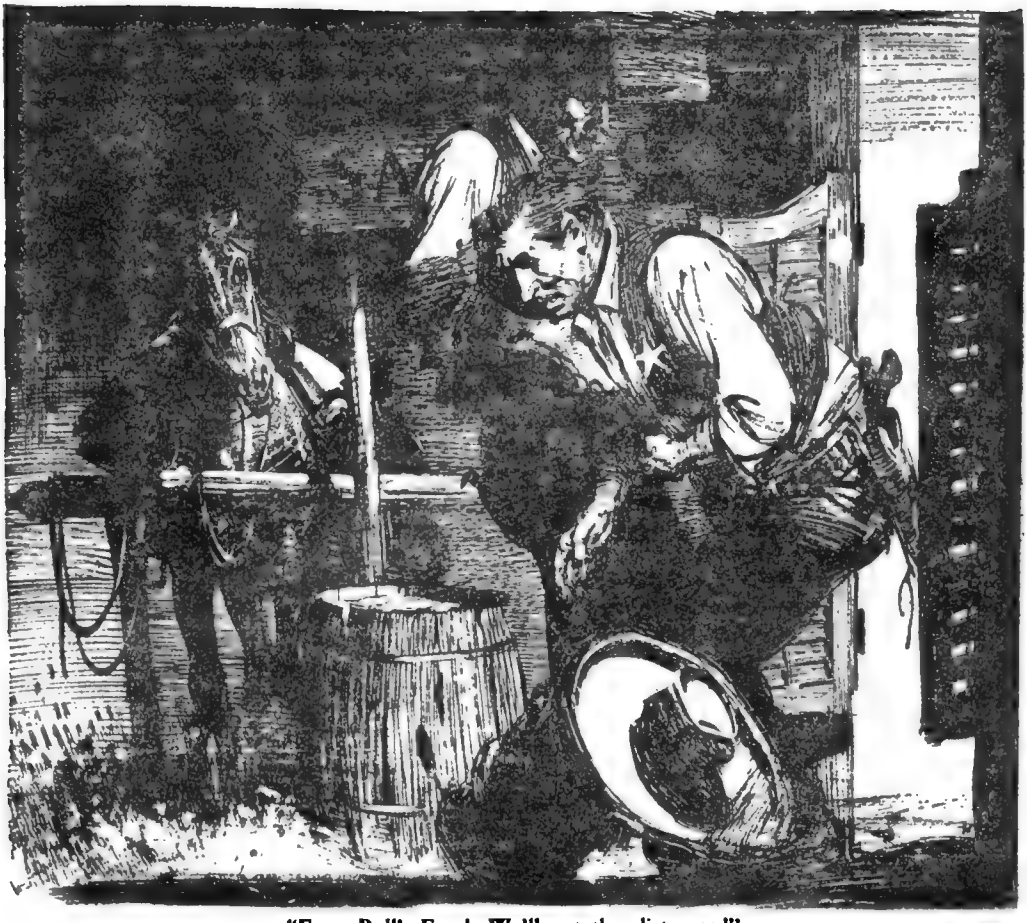
Reaching for the reins, the big man said. "We'll just take our time going back, Frank. I'd kind of like to do a little deer hunting over around Lazy Squaw before I go in. I figure the bank will have its money back in a couple days."

The small man swung into his saddle, shaking his head uncertainly. "I can't figure what's got into you, Sheriff. We cornered the owlhooters who robbed the bank, but we had to kill them before we got the money back. Now you stand there and let another damn thief ride off with the money. He'll damn well never send it back."

The big man smiled into the darkness. "Want to bet on that?"

"He's Blackjack Clovis' son. He's got four shades of killer in him, just waiting to be let out."

"No," Sheriff Jeff Greenough said. "That's what made him such a tough nut to crack. There's no harder man to tame than a man who's about to go bad and doesn't want to."



"Easy, Bull! Easy! We'll get the dirty son!"

THE TOWN THAT BULLETS BUILT

Mike Trent, ex-lawdog, thought he'd gunned down his last outlaw, until a certain quick-triggered crowd of tinhorns turned Horizon town into a trail's-end for the damned. . . .

HE HAD GIVEN his guns away. There would be no more gun-fighting for him, not Mike Trent. He'd done his share toward bringing law and order to Horizon. A man deserved a rest, after eleven years of beating toughs and vagrants to gun-butts, of walking into crowded saloons and taking men out to deposit them in the *juzgado*.

Mike Trent told himself all this, sitting in the saddle and walking his piebald mare through the dusty town. "Doggone, I'm gettin' on. Thirty-eight, next summer. Time I spent some hours on my spread, makin' me a few pesos."

He watched Millie Gannon come out of the drygoods shop, arms taut with bundles, and walk toward the X Bar buck-

By GARDNER F. FOX

board. "Time I was gettin' hitched. And no woman wants to think about findin' her husband loaded up with lead in the middle of the town street some day. Man's place is with a woman, sittin' in a home."

Millie Gannon was a widow. Her husband had been killed by a stray bullet from the gun of a Texas trail driver just before Mike had dropped the gunman with a Colt brass-jacketed .45 bullet. She had two children, and she was the sole owner of the prosperous X Bar spread that bordered Mike's Box Cross ranch.

Mike shoved his boot-toe into the piebald's ribs, moved him nearer to the X bar wagon. His right hand tipped the brim of his big Stetson.

"Afternoon, Millie. Right good to see you again."

"Mike!" she said softly, turning a smooth-cheeked face upward. Her mouth lingered over the word, although Mike didn't notice it, rubbing his hand across the hot pommel of his big Cheyenne saddle. "Mike! I haven't seen you in a long time. Peggy's been asking for you. And Danny. He said you promised him a fishing rod."

Trent laughed in his throat, almost silently. "Reckon I did, at that. The button's got me there. I got a nice one all picked out for him, too."

"Bring it oven, then. Come Sunday—and stay for dinner. Chicken, Mike. Roasted. And—berry pie."

Mike treated himself to a full view of Millie's blue eyes, found them soft and oddly moving. He cleared his throat again silently. "Roast chicken. An' berry pie."

Millie stepped closer, put a hand up to the leather stirrup. "Say you'll come, Mike. You've been a stranger too long."

He wouldn't look at her. He let his eyes move down the street, past Streeter's livery stable, and the Full Glass saloon, across the dusty street to the general store. A man in a checkered vest, wearing a gun low on his right thigh, came out of the blacksmith's and moved down the board walk, slowly, sliding his boots along, hand touching his gun butt.

Mike recognized the signs of a professional gunman, and involuntarily tensed. Then: 'Shucks' he told himself, 'you done hung up your guns. Let Bull take care of that gent.' Millie was shaking his right leg by the stirrup.

"May I tell Danny and Peggy that you'll come, Mike?"

"Why, sure, Millie. I reckon that's right kind of you. An' you tell Danny he'll get that fishin' pole, too. An' Peggy—I got to get her a little somethin'. Wouldn't be right to treat one an' not th' other. Got to get her a little present."

He was talking too much, trying to forget the gunman going into the Full Glass saloon. He shook his head sternly, saying, "Dunno much about she-buttons, but you bet I'll think o' somethin'."

Millie laughed merrily up at him, her nose crinkling. "You big old bachelor! What in the world can you give a girl like Peggy?"

"I'll think of somethin'," he said stubbornly.

He swung down out of the saddle and helped her mount the springless seat of the freshly painted buckboard. Millie lifted the leather reins and flipped them across the backs of the X-Bar bays. She called, "Don't forget Sunday, Mike."

"I won't. You tell Danny an' Peggy I'll bring 'em presents, too." He watched the dust rise and puff under the churning wheels. He stood and stared after it foolishly, telling himself to walk right over to Kulp's general store and pick up the beans and bacon and flour he needed to keep himself in found. To forget about the gunman, and his eleven years of keeping this town safe.

Mike sighed, took off his hat and scratched his thinning brown hair. He grinned, "Reckon I'm doin' a heap of wasted worryin' about that rider. He's probably just passin' through, on his way back to his spread."

PURPOSEFULLY, he turned his high-heeled boots toward Kulp's. He waved to young Jim Prouty and his pretty bride, Lucy. Lucy'd been just about Peggy Cannon's age when he'd come to Horizon. Made a man feel old, seein' these buttons grow up, marry and stake out their land. Made a man feel he was missin' a lot in life, not gettin' hitched himself. Maybe Sunday, he might see Millie alone for awhile.

The interior of the big general store was cool and dim, away from the hot Arizona sun. Benjie Kulp waved to him, turning from the butter tub to squint in the dimness.

"Th' usual, Benjie. Beans, pork an' flour. Put in a can of sweet crackers, too. Might have company, one of these days."

"Buttons like sweet crackers," nodded Benjie, not seeing Mike blush. "Peggy an' Danny an' the widow Gannon goin' to pay you a social call?"

Mike chuckled quietly. "Can't never tell. X-Bar's a mighty close neighbor."

"X-Bar an' your Box Cross'd make one big spread," Benjie said casually, ladling flour. "Good place for ranches, this Horizon. Town's growin'. See by the Tombstone paper that we're going to have a bank, come next month. Shippin' gold and bullion by overland."

Mike said, "That so?" just as casually, but his muscles tensed, as the muscles of a range horse will tense when a lariat is looped around the pommel. He relaxed, remembering that Bull Davis was sheriff, now.

"Folks around town gettin' loans. Jim and Lucy Prouty startin' their spread with a loan. The Baxters, over by the creek, too. Lots of spreads don't need it. Lots do. Young ones, just settin' up. Thanks to you, they can set up, Mike."

"Corral that talk, Benjie," said Mike good-naturedly.

"Won't hurt to tell a man like you he's appreciated. Man likes to hear it. 'Specially a man that kills as part of his stock in trade. Makes him more human. Killer's got to be cold, like you. Take Bull, now. Too good a man. Can't see the badness for the goodness. You know what I mean?"

Mike knew, through the hurt of Benjie's words. A killer! A killer had to be cold. Just walk in and face a spitting gun and shoot a man down, and watch him spasm out his life while you blew smoke from your gun barrel.

A killer oughtn't to think about gettin' hitched. He'd have to give that some more though. Maybe he'd sit out that Sunday dinner at home, send a puncher over to the X-Bar with the presents.

He took the packages from Benjie's arms and walked with them out into the hot stillness of the street. He put the food in a big leather saddlebag, and tightened the strap. He ran his long fingers across the smooth leather of the kak, trying to rub out the itching for the handles of his Colts.

One week ago, before he'd turned in his battered badge, he'd have walked over to the Full Glass saloon and taken the gunman's sixgun from him. And made him state his business in Horizon. And if Mike hadn't liked what he was told, he'd have escorted the man out.

"That's th' only way," he whispered. "You got to be meaner than th' other *hombre*. You don't dare see the goodness for the badness."

He thought of Millie. Would his being a cold killer matter to her? He had to be sure. Mike groaned. He couldn't take a chance there. It wasn't like walking down a street to meet another gunfighter. He loved her too much to take a chance. He had to be sure. Not only for her sake, but for Danny and Peggy, too.

That made him think of the fishing pole. He smiled gently, gave his hands a final rub on the saddle, and went back across the way to Streeter's. He made a little play of picking out the poles. He took them in hands that were curiously gentle. He weighed them, whipped them.

"Boy don't get a new pole every day," he told the clerk.

"That's a fine pole, Mr. Trent. Little higher priced than the others, but it's got better balance."

"I'll take it," nodded Mike. "I want sometin' for a girl about twelve years old. Not a doll. A present she might like for a long time."

"A bracelet? Perhaps a ring?"

Mike shoved back his Stetson and scratched his head. He smiled ruefully. "Don't rightly know what to say to them ideas. Can you make some others, just to keep me thinkin'? I—"

He was whirling before the sound of the gunshot registered on the clerk. He was halfway to the door, hands fumbling ineptly at his gunless thighs, before he remembered. Sheepishly, he turned back to face the clerk. "Habit's mighty hard to break in a man. You wrap up that pole an' put in somethin' nice for a girl. I'll be back for 'em."

HE WENT out the door, walking slowly toward the Full Glass. He vaguely noted the scared faces peering from windows and doorways. A man came out of the livery stable and yelled, "Bull went in there, Mike. Maybe he's got a tailholt on a unbroke bronc." Mike nodded, the set of his face not changing.

He stepped through the batwing doors, slid sideways against the wall, out of the light streaming through the doorway. Bull was sitting at a table, hand pressed against his right forearm. The barkeep was bent over him, putting a clean cloth on the wound.

The gunman was gone. Probably out the back way, thought Mike. He said clearly, "How'd it happen, Bull?"

Bull cursed softly. "Stranger in town. Told him to hang up his six. Wouldn't listen to reason. Pulled on me when I wasn't expectin' it."

He would have expected it, Mike thought wryly. But then, he'd been sheriff for eleven years.

A man stirred in the gloom of a far corner. He wore a tight black coat and trousers stuck into clean boots. He said, "It was a fair fight. I saw it. The stranger could have killed the sheriff. He just winged his gun arm."

"Who're you?" asked Mike in surprise.

"A man who plays with chance, friend." White hands riffled a pack of shiny cards expertly. "Care for a game?"

"Professional gamblers ain't welcome in Horizon," snapped Mike. "Pack your duds and clear. By dark."

The gambler blustered, "I don't know you, friend. But the sheriff put his all-right brand on it."

Bull looked up, grimacing against the pain. "The boys from the ranches like to have a little fun, Mike. Don't see no harm in one man pittin' himself against them, long's he plays an honest game."

"You fool!" snapped Mike. "First one, then two. After that who knows how many?"

"No call to go on the prod, Mike," growled Bull. "I'm wearin' the badge now. Go take yore rest on the Box Cross. You done earned it."

"I got eleven years backin' my talk," Mike snapped. "I put eleven years into makin' Horizon a fit town for decent folks. And I'm not goin' to let a damned fool like you louse things up!"

Bull stood up. "You sayin' I ain't fit to be sheriff, Mike?"

Mike waved a hand, wearily. "You're readin' my brand wrong, Bull. I don't mean that. I just want to tell you that you got to treat these mavericks th' way they ought to be treated. Hit 'em first. Then palaver."

"Reckon I'm learnin' that, Mike. Slow but steady. Next time I'll throw down on them first."

Mike nodded slowly. "I know you will, Bull. Sorry my fool tongue ran away with me. Let me walk you to the doc's to get that thing fixed up."

Mike was stitching a torn saddle-cinch when Link Gahaney found him, two days later, to tell him about the robbery. "Three fellers done it, Mike. Down by the river fork. Wore neckerchiefs wrapped around their faces. Hightailed it due north."

The needle flashed in the sunlight as Mike went on sewing. His heart pumped faster, but he lifted the cinch to stare at it critically, rip out a stitching and insert the needle to redo it.

"You hear me, Mike?" demanded Link, leaning over the slick fork of his Texas style saddle. "Three fellers robbed th' Overland! Got the bank gold, too."

"Bull Davis is sheriff now."

"Why, sure. I know that. But I thought as how you'd want to know."

Mike smiled. "Thanks, Link. But I don't see's it concerns me. Now if you think they're headed this way, I'll take down the old Sharps and clean 'er out."

Link grinned. "Catch you with a dirty gun. Just the same, I feel kinda sorry for the Proutys and Baxters. They'd made their loans in Tombstone, you know. They was countin' to set up their places on that money."

Mike resumed the needle and thread. He knew Link was watching him through narrowed eylids. After a moment Link waved an arm. Mike stood up then, shouting, "See you in town. Thanks for droppin' by."

He watched Link Gahaney ride away. Damn the man! Just when he'd finished palaverin' himself into a courtin' mood, too. Now—

MIKE KICKED the saddle aside and walked around the bunkhouse. He squinted across the rolling grassland as though trying to see the river fork all the way from his spread. He was picturing it in his mind, but the ocotilla and the glints on the roiling water turned into Millie's red lips and the blue glisten of her eyes.

"Got no call to rile myself over Bull's job," he growled. "Got a right to set back an' eat roasted chicken an' berry pie at my age."

He stomped back to the wooden bench and picked up the saddle. He stitched carefully until he stuck his thumb. He swore luridly and threw the big Cheyenne from him. Mike eyed it malevolently. "Wonder where Bull's posse is, 'bout now? If I know Bull, they're fannin' dust forty miles from where them coyotes really are!" Bull Davis was the poorest trailer Horizon had ever seen.

He sat there in the hot sunshine and remembered Benjie Kulp. "Young folks. Just gettin' started. Need loans." The loans were gone, now—money that would have meant cattle and wells and food and tools. The Proutys would be set back five years, the Baxters even longer. Jim Prouty was a good cowhand. He could tie up with an outfit for a while. The others—well, some of the men were getting on. Like him, Mike Trent.

"Gettin' useless for quick action that needs young, strong hands," he argued. Mike held out his fingers, wriggling them. He chuckled. "Reckon they ain't so rusted I couldn't beat a few rannies to the draw. 'Taint that. It's just that I need to settle down. Man don't get no place, always settin' the pace. Man needs to be put to pasture when he's reached his peak, same's a good cowpony."

Mike felt the surge of his blood. He stood up and walked around, looking at the horses in the log corral. His eyes rested on the piebald, who whinnied at him, flinging up her head. Mike grinned, "Feel like a ride, Nancy? You wait. I'll get the Winchester. Might sight some brush rabbits."

He let the mare run, kneeing her south from the spread, along a path that would sooner or later cross the river fork. He rode with the Winchester in the saddle sheath, but every once in a while he would stretch a hand down to loosen it, to keep it ready. "In case we sight some of them rabbits," he told the mare with a slow smile on his weatherbeaten face.

He angled onto the road up from Tombstone a mile from the fork. He paced the mare slowly, eyes ranging the clumps of lecheguilla and the ocotilla poles that ended in crimson flowers. He pulled the mare to a restless halt at the fork, seeing the road trampled and rent by hoofs. His eyes went along the broad path of hoofs that the posse had made.

"Reckon the boys found themselves something to follow, Nancy. But you know, if I was a stage robber, I'd make tracks for sheriffs to follow. Then I'd double back. A smart robber would do that. I think these boys were smart. Why? Because I've got a hunch the gunman who winged Bull's wrist was one of 'em. Man gets to have hunches when he's been eleven years after badmen."

Mike sighed, thinking of Millie. He said defensively, "I'm just out ridin'. The mare needs exercise. Can't help it if I think while I ride. No harm in keepin' my brain from rustin' over. And why does that make the gunman who shot Bull smart? Because he just winged him. Knew that wouldn't make no hue an' cry after him if he'd cashed in Bull's chips for him."

Again Mike kneed the mare, letting her run. "River narrows down further on. Gets right shallow. Might be you'd like a swim, Nancy."

The mare didn't want to swim, but Mike crooned to her softly. They moved out into the water toward a link of connecting sandbars. Here the mare could walk in water up to her fetlocks. Mike let her walk for a long time, his eyes searching the nearer bank.

When he saw the flat ledge-rock running from the river bottom up toward the grass, he made the mare scramble up it. "Rock won't leave no tracks," he told the horse.

He found the tracks in soft soil a little farther on, before they disappeared in the tall grass. Mike reined in and sat his kak easily. "Could be they'd go anywhere. We'll just scout around an' call it a day. Can't do more'n this without

makin' Bull Davis mad at us, maybe."

Ten minutes later, he found a soiled blue flannel shirt hastily covered with rocks. A thrust out sleeve-cuff caught his eye. Mike reached from the saddle, pulled it loose. He held it up. A bullet had ripped along the right sleeve.

"Just cuttin' the flesh," Mike commented. "There ain't no blood. It was more an inconvenience than anything else. But a man might have to explain a bullet-ripped shirt—if he was goin' anyplace where there was curious folks. Like a town. And Horizon is the nearest town in sixty miles."

Mike opened his eyes wide. "Now there's a right smart notion, Nancy. Nobody seen them hombres. Bandannas around their faces. Link said so. I told you them gents was smart, didn't I?"

He thrust the shirt into a saddlebag and locked the strap.

"Let's go pay Horizon a visit, Nancy. We'll leave this shirt for Bull. He might be able to smell out a man with a sore arm, an' ask him a few leadin' questions. We done our bit. An' we're still free to take in that roast chicken an' berry pie, come Sunday."

ON SATURDAY afternoon, Mike saw the package for Danny and Peggy lying on the kitchen shelf where he had placed it Tuesday night. Smiling he took it down, tore the wrappings and cord and took out a shiny fishing pole. He lifted the wrapping paper, shook it, tore it.

"Drat! No present for Peggy. That fool clerk!"

Mike rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It's a cinch I can't go over there without a gift for her. An' I can't send a hand into town to pick one out. I'd better go myself. Give be an excuse to see Bull, anyhow, find out what he's been doin'."

He took the mare. He rode easily, enjoying the cool breeze from the west, the fragrance of the sage and the white lily-blossoms of the Spanish bayonet. It was dusk as he turned the piebald into Horizon's main street.

Mike spent a little time picking out a bracelet. He watched gravely as the clerk wrapped it, apologizing for neglecting to include the ring that he himself had picked. Mike tucked the package securely in the pocket of his leather chaps.

The town was bright with light, he noticed with surprise, as he stepped from the store. Kerosene lamps shed a pale brilliance on hitching rails and board walks. A tinny piano sounded from the Full Glass, faint and discordant amid the sudden gusts of laughter.

"Cowhands in for a spree," he told himself, heading for Bull's little adobe-walled office. He remembered the professional gambler, and scowled.

The office was empty. Mike peered in, shouted, "You, Bull? In the back?" Slowly, he closed the door. He stared at the Full Glass. It seemed, later, that he had stood there a long time, almost posing in the darkness, waiting, before the shot sounded.

It was muffled, as though a gun-barrel were pressed into a man's middle when the trigger was pulled.

This time Mike ran. He saw Bull come reeling out of the Full Glass, bent over, both hands squeezing desperately at the pit of his abdomen. Mike noted that both his guns were in the holsters, untouched.

Bull was breathing hoarsely as Mike caught him. "Easy, there. It's Mike, Bull. Now, easy. We'll have you on your feet again, easy. Better lie down."

"Mike? That—Mike? Sure. Found the shirt, an' your note."

"Don't talk!"

"Got to talk. Going, Mike. Don't try—run a blazer on—old pal. Want to say—you're right. Shoot first. Ask after."

The Full Glass was very still. Mike heard a man saying something that was followed by a shout of laughter, a banging on the tinny piano, the shrill laughter of a woman. A woman! Horizon didn't have shrilly laughing women any more!

"Bumped a man—back there—in right arm. Stopped to—ask him—a question. He—gave me—answer—with—gun."

The noise from the Full Glass grew louder. Horizon had slipped back through eleven years. A woman laughed. The clatter of a chuck-a-luck box blended with the whirr of a wheel.

"They came—today. Like it—was a signal. Painted girls. All th' equipment for a gamblin' joint. Bill Kennedy's sold out. Goin'—East. Seemed like—a stampede—that I—couldn't—stop. Mike, you

hear me?—can't seem to see you, Mike."

"I hear you, Bull."

Faintly he heard him, through the blood drumming in his ears. A small voice inside him was whispering, "Goodbye, Millie. It was a nice dream."

"Mike? I'm sorry. I guess I—wasn't cut out for—bein' sheriff. I ain't—no—killer."

"I reckon I needed a sign, Bull," he said brokenly. "I'm sorry it had to be—you."

His wrist brushed his eyes. They turned cold, hard. Leaning forward, he unbuckled the heavy cartridge belts that circled Bull's waist. He lifted them free, swung them about, closed the buckles. He tied them to his thighs.

Standing in the radiance from the Full Glass, he went for his guns. They lifted to the magnetism of his hands. Mike smiled coldly. "I reckon I ain't as old as I thought."

Calmly he stepped across Bill's sprawling body and into the path of light coming through the batwing doors. His heels made slow, crisp sounds on the board walk, on the steps. The doors swung to the touch of his hand. He slid inside, back to the wall.

A COWHAND saw him, held his whiskey glass in midair, frozen. A girl turned to stare. His eyes played over the room. Three men were at the bar. The man in the middle was rubbing his right arm. The piano died with the rattle of the chuck-a-luck box and the wheel. The laughter eased into a flat, dead silence.

The three men grew aware of the difference. They turned, seeking an explanation with their hard, bright eyes. They stiffened when they saw Mike.

"You three," Mike snapped coldly. "I'm arresting you for robbery. I'm takin' the man with the sore arm—for murder. Undo your guns."

The three men went as one for their Colts. Mike's hands flashed down and up. He was firing and twisting aside, big guns bucking in his hands. The middle man went down grotesquely, in pieces. The man on the left went back into the bar, and sagged, mouth open, eyes upturned. The third man was shooting back, snarling hate and a string of curses.

A bullet slammed like a hammer into Mike's shoulder, knocking him sideways. Another bullet caught his thigh. He lurched to the right, but his left hand kept triggering his gun. The man in front of him bent double, clutching at himself.

Mike straightened, watched him kick. He braced himself against the wall.

"Get out, all of you. Get *now*. I ain't stoppin' to ask questions. I'm a killer. If I see you in Horizon tomorrow, I'll shoot you down. Get!"

The professional gambler opened his mouth, then closed it. He shrugged philosophically. "You can't buck a game like his," he told the crowd.

The cowhands went first, eyes downcast. Mike knew them all, but he stared coldly and unseeingly at them. The girls went next, their painted faces not laughing. The gamblers went last.

Mike walked across the room, guns still in his hands. He knelt, fumbling over the dead man. In the middle man's gunbelt he found the little square of paper with lines drawn on it and marked with a penciled X. He studied it a moment, nodded, then holstered his guns.

When he reached the street, wagons and horses were pounding and rocking along the road toward Tombstone.

Mike watched them go. He felt like Bull and the three men sprawled on the Full Glass floor. No feeling. Just—dead. . . .

Sunlight was in his eyes. He twisted on his bed, roared, "Buck! Buck, where'n Hades are you? Buck!"

A young cowhand ran into the room. Mike scowled at him. "Pull down that shade, dammit. Man can't sleep with the sun in his eyes. An' the doc said I needed sleep."

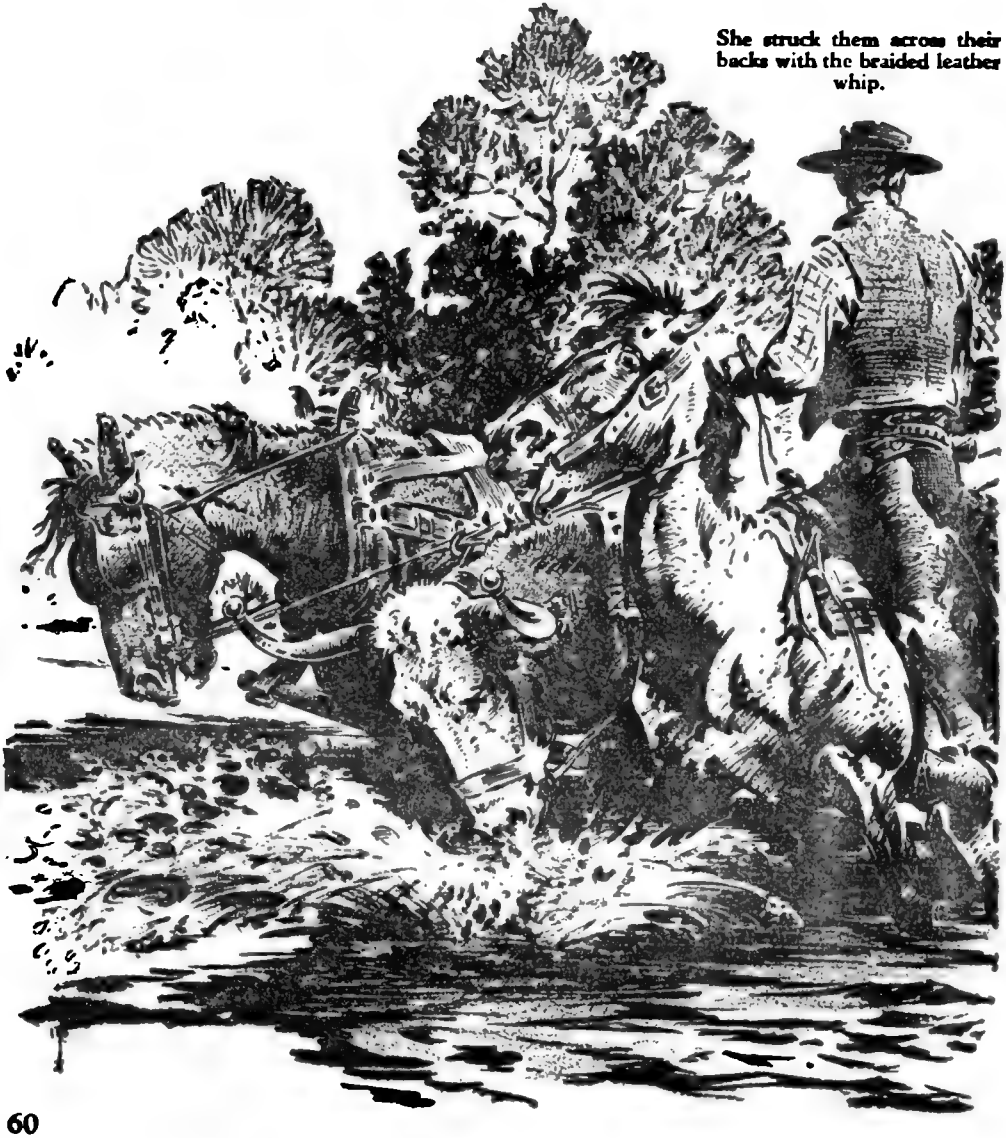
"Sure, Mike. Sure. I was palavering with Link, outside. They found the gold from the stage where the map said it was. Link says to tell you the Proutys and Baxters and some others are comin' here to see you."

Mike sneered. "See me? What for? For killin' them that needed killin'? Nobody gives a party for the public executioner, do they? That's all I am. Get now!"

(Please turn to page 98)

HELL'S FREE

Sodbusters, gamblers, ex-fighters of the Blue and the Gray, the frontier heroes-to-be, and the scum of the border, they all flocked to the town of Rifle, Wyoming, where lush green land was free—in exchange for a man's honor, his body and his soul!



She struck them across their backs with the braided leather whip.

FOR NESTERS!

Stirring Novel of Claim-Jumper Killers

By PETER DAWSON

CHAPTER ONE

Fifty Dollars Worth of Hell

IT WAS a sorry sight, except for the girl. The wagon's end gate was under and the muddy brown current coiled around and over it as it would momentarily lift a little, then settle back again. The girl was using the whip, not well, and the ox on the off side would take the punishment matter-of-factly, his movements sluggish and deliberate and never quite matching the lunging effort of the grulla

mare, his harness mate. So it was a see-saw affair, accomplishing nothing beyond working the rear wheels deeper into the sand.

Bill Wells decided it must be another nester wagon headed for Rifle and on to one of the homesteads up along Squaw Creek range. They'd been coming through for a week now, drawn by Ted Vance's fanciful summons, and would probably keep coming for another month —a tribe of regular down-at-the-heel farmers. Their worn-out gear—everything they owned—was loaded into the wagons. Usually a milk cow or two came trailing along behind, together with a litter of dirty kids sometimes walking, or sometimes riding the wagon, or even riding the cows.

Bill guessed maybe his having watched them roll along the road that crossed the meadow bottom back there where he'd worked was one of the reasons he was moving on. There were other reasons, of course. One was the same fiddle-footedness that had brought him wandering all the way up here from New Mexico Territory last summer just to have a look at some new country. Another was that he'd laid by a good stake over the winter and early spring. Yesterday he'd got to thinking he was a fool, still working when he had already saved as much as a man could rightly want or need. So along about noon he had drawn his wages, tied his possibles in the blanket roll and ridden away from a good job. It was nice to be on a lonesome again with no one to answer to, nice to be headed for a lot of country that wasn't yet fenced or plowed or cluttered in any way.

And he hadn't gone near far enough yet, as this bogged down wagon was showing him.

He wouldn't have bothered stopping if he'd seen any menfolks around. But the only person he could spot was this girl and, nester or not, he couldn't pass her by. So now he reined the chestnut on across the ford marked by two blazed cedar posts on either bank. Once the water came belly-deep to the gelding and he lifted his long legs from stirrups and crossed his boots ahead of the horn, saying gently, "Steady, Red, steady," to help the animal. Then when he struck the shallows he swung on down toward the wagon.

When the girl finally saw him coming he noticed the way she settled back on the high seat, the straightness going from her spine and the reins hanging loose. He had known she was young when he first saw her, for she had a certain slimness about her that couldn't have belonged to a skinny, older woman. As he drew closer the oval of her face under the sunbonnet gradually bore out the promise her figure had made from a distance. Her plain gray flannel dress was tight-gathered at the waist and the gentle roundness above that slender line was a youthful, utterly feminine contour. And as she reached up and swept the bonnet back off her head, looking his way, the dark copper blaze of her hair was the thing he had an eye for. The thought struck him, Damn, they're twins!

HE HAD paid her this high tribute before quite realizing it; and at once he qualified the thought, admitting only that the sheen of the girl's hair exactly matched the chestnut's coloring. It was unfair to the chestnut to be called the twin of a nester girl, he was thinking, for he was inordinately proud of the animal. Still, the closer he got the more he had to admit that the comparison wasn't so bad after all.

He finally reined up the bank, and in alongside the wagon's slewed-around front wheel, and his lean face took on a grin he'd never thought he would be using on her kind. As he spoke he touched the wide brim of his hat. "What's the matter, Chestnut? Trouble?"

Her eyes flashed immediate, bright defiance. "I've heard some peculiar questions," she said, her tone smooth and touched with a mocking softness, "but never one so insane as that. Yes, I'm in trouble. And my name's not Chestnut."

Bill liked them hot-tempered and now was momentarily reminded of that percentage girl down in Socorro who had looked so kissable but hadn't been. She had turned out nothing but sharp nails and sharp tongue and, although she would have been trash alongside this girl, still they were alike in a certain way—the same way two unbroken, high-spirited

colts are alike. He liked that kind of women.

We'll string her along, he told himself, leisurely thumbing the wide hat onto the back of his blond head and letting his glance go to the half-buried rear wheel with a serious regard he didn't at all feel. The chestnut heaved a loud, relaxing breath to point up his slow inspection of the girl's predicament.

Bill looked around at her again, then beyond to the posts marking the line of the ford, drawling, "Missed the shallows a bit, didn't you?"

"Another, exactly like the first," the girl breathed explosively, the line of her lips set tight in growing exasperation. She was obviously near the end of her patience.

"Another what, miss?"

"Another question."

"Like the first?" It took him a second or two to catch her meaning and when he did his smile came again, turning his face youthful and good-humored. "Yeah. Guess I'm just makin' words while I look the thing over. Have you tried hawin' 'em around to line up the wheels so they can pull better."

"I have."

"Didn't work, eh?" He scratched his forehead, eyeing the ox standing sleepily, head-hung. "Can't be much fun with one o' them critters in harness."

"It isn't." The girl was looking across at him with barely bridled anger. Her coloring and the delicate moulding of her features were a rare combination and effected him queerly, giving him a strangely empty feeling. Then she was saying quite deliberately, "Now if you've had your look and will be kind enough to move away, I'll try again."

He felt his face getting hot. "Beg pardon for the look, miss. But we don't often run onto your kind, me and Red here." He had spoken without realizing exactly what he was saying. After all, wasn't she a nester?

His words brought a change in her glance, one of outright embarrassment. "I didn't mean me. It was the way you looked over the wagon. As though there was nothing to be done about it."

"Oh, that," he drawled. "Well, you'll admit you got the thing hung up real good."

"I'll get it out."

"Looks like a busted axle back there."

Now her embarrassment faded before a deep concern. She leaned out so she could see back beyond the hickory-bowed tarp arched over the wagon's bed, studying the look of the big wheel down in the water. "Does it mean I can't go on?"

"We'll have to see."

Bill took his rope from the saddle and shook out a wide loop and, watching him, she noticed that he did it without once looking at the rope or his sure, long-fingered hands. He kneed the chestnut on out in front of her ill-assorted team and tossed his loop expertly over the tongue-end. Now she couldn't take her eyes from him, marveling at his sureness and economy of motion. She saw him take two turns of the rope about his horn and touch the chestnut lightly with spur. The rope tightened and the tongue came on around squealing a complaint, the grulla stepping nervously sideways and the ox coming along reluctantly.

Once the tongue was lined properly Bill flicked his rope free and rode on back to put the chestnut into the stream. He had a boot and one leg under water half way to his knees as he leaned over and reached down into the swirling brown water, laying a tie into the wheel-hub. When the rope was tight he came on up abreast the ox and took his turn around the horn again. Then he looked back at the girl and said, "Let's go! Give 'em hell!"

VIRGINIA RUSH didn't like him, she told herself. Not a bit. A decent man didn't curse in a woman's presence. Nor did he mock her the way this stranger had with his smile when he first came up. Another thing was that if a man insisted on wearing woolen underwear this balmy weather he should roll it up so his shirt sleeves would hide it instead of wearing it to his wrists with the shirt rolled to elbow. Still another thing was that he wore a gun.

It was a big gun and not pretty. Rather than the plain cedar handle, she would have liked to see one of horn or pearl; she had yet to learn the westerner's reticence over carrying a pearl-handled weapon. But the mere fact of his wearing a revolver was something she held against him. True,

she had seen few men not carrying arms these past three days since leaving the train in Laramie. But it was still wrong. She could tell by the worn spot along the thigh of this tall man's waist overalls that the holster-thong was as much a part of his dress as the curled-brim Stetson hat or the yellow silk handkerchief about his neck that had left an unsightly line of contrasting deep tan and white against his skin.

Yet she supposed she was being a bit unfair with him, disliking him when he was really trying to help. And just then he spoke to cut her thoughts short. "Ready any time you are."

She slapped the ox and the mare awkwardly with reins and struck them across their backs with the braided leather whip. The mare acted as she had before, lunging back and forth. The ox simply leaned into the harness and didn't seem to be trying very hard.

It was the ox and Bill's chestnut, with little help from the mare, that turned the trick. The big rear wheels finally bit into the bank, bumped up and over it.

Virginia heard water splashing out the end-gate and sloshing around in the bed. She gave a quick look in under the tarp crying, "Oh, everything's getting soaked!"

Bill reined the chestnut quickly on back until he was close below her. He stepped out of the saddle to the wheel-hub and swung up onto the seat so close to her their arms were pressed together. He took the reins without a word. And as he commenced sawing the team back she was acutely aware of his bigness and strength and of the wide span of his shoulders. Strangely enough she didn't think to move away from him, though there was a lot of the seat left on her side.

He got the ox and mare moving together somehow, gradually backing the wagon toward the bank. He hoisted a boot to the brake, which she hadn't had the strength to manipulate, and as the rear wheels were suddenly dropping down the bank once again he stepped on the brake and locked the wheels just clear of the water.

Virginia held her breath as the wagon hung there, the end-gate low now and the water pouring out around it with a sibilant splashing into the gravelly shallows. She said, "Thank you. You've saved our things a wetting."

"Where's your man?" Bill asked.

She thought deliberately of her answer before giving it. "He left right after breakfast and rode on in to Rifle. I'm meeting him there this afternoon."

"It'll be late," Bill drawled. He was unaccountably sore, mad clear through. He stood up and raised the whip and belted the ox unmercifully across the hindquarters. The wagon lurched clear of the bank. Bill dropped the reins and climbed down and went back to look over the damage.

She would have a man!

The axle was broken, all right; or rather badly split along nearly three feet of its length.

Virginia was standing there close behind him when he came erect, wanting to know, "Is it bad?"

He lifted his shoulders and let them settle slowly, thinking a moment before he said, "Nothing that can't be fixed."

"How do I fix it?" she asked worriedly. All the spunk was gone out of her now and she even smiled helplessly as she spoke, as though to sooth the sting of the things she'd said a while ago.

"You don't fix it." He frowned. "Got any wire?"

She nodded relievedly. "Barbed wire. Pat brought several rolls along thinking the stores in Rifle might be running short."

"They probably are," was his dry comment as he walked around and untied the rope that held the tarp taut at the back.

He went silently to work, noticing one thing that didn't quite tie in with his first judgment of what she and her man might be. The wagon was the best of its kind, a Peter Schutler, sturdy and built of hickory for just this kind of rough going. Inside, boxes and trunks and bales, every heavy article, had been roped down tight with an orderliness that somehow tied in with the girl's look of neatness and freshness. She was an uncommon nester, unlike the ones Bill had seen, and as he got to work he wondered about that.

LATER, while he rode up-stream looking for a cottonwood log, she followed his suggestion and unharnessed her

team, staking them out on grass. By the time he was back again and had levered the wagon's rear end up so there was room to drop the axle off, she had a fire going and a dutch-oven in the coals and he could catch the tantalizing odor of beef cooking. He hadn't realized it was so late, time to eat the noon meal.

She helped all she could, but it was mostly heavy work. When she could leave her fire she would come across and watch him. And presently she began talking. He figured it was mostly because she felt ashamed of having been so brusque with him and he was sparse in his answers, wanting to show her he wasn't a man to take such from a woman. Anyway, it didn't matter. She had a man, and that was all there was to it.

Once she asked, "Did you ever hear of Theodore Vance?"

He just nodded.

"Is he to be trusted?"

"I wouldn't know, ma'am." He had nearly called her "miss" again. "He's a land agent, which don't make him count for much on the face of it. Most of them are grafters."

"Have you ever seen this?"

He looked up and regarded a sheet of paper she was holding out to him. He took it from her finally, curious, having heard about it many times but never before having seen it. And now he smiled as the ornate headline in heavy letters arcoss the top of the sheet caught his eye:

GOLD FROM THE SOIL.

Below that, in smaller print, ran Theodore Vance's tempting story:

Settlers! Pioneers! Speculators! Our Boys In Blue! A vast section of fertile land along Squaw Creek in beautiful untouched Western Wyoming is now open to homestead. Situated near the thriving metropolis of Rifle, this land offers limitless opportunities for men and their families wanting to make their fortunes by raising crops on land never before turned by the plow. Think of it! In one year, or at the most in two, you can be the owner of a quarter-section farm the likes of which cannot be found in any other part of our country—nay, in all the world!

COME ONE, COME ALL!

For information write Theodore T. Vance, Esq., Real Estate, Rifle, Wyoming.

Or just head for Rifle without writing.

Beat the others!

First Come, First Served!

Bill looked at the girl and handed back the sheet.

"Well?" she said.

"The way I got it, this Vance horned in on a cattleman. Hogged some of his range." Bill squatted down and went back to wrapping the barb-wire about the axle, wondering if he could make it tight enough to hold. He guessed he could.

"Pat wrote him," Virginia said seriously. "He's saving us a choice piece of land."

"Another thing," Bill drawled without looking up. "I hear it didn't make much difference to the rancher. Fella by the name of Cable it is, Bob Cable. This Squaw Creek is nothin' but a narrow strip of grass running up through the hills into timber. Anyone that goes up there will have to grub out trees and stumps and probably rock."

"But he told Pat it was a fine piece of land. The one he's saving us."

"Sure. He's after the money. What did you have to pay him?"

"Only fifty dollars."

Bill chuckled. "*Only* fifty. Why, ma'am, this Ted Vance didn't have to lay out a blessed nickel for that land. It's government land, same as most of what you see all the way from here to Laramie. He's just set himself up a tinhorn business. You don't need his say-so to move onto Squaw Creek. He's a plain joker, ma'am."

"He can't be!" she bridled. "And don't keep on calling me 'ma'am'."

He looked up at her, puzzled. "You said you had a man."

"I have. Pat's my brother."

Suddenly everything was all right again. Everything was fine! Bill couldn't help grinning as he thought, All this fuss for nothin'. Aloud, he drawled, "Beg pardon. Thought you were hitched."

"Well, I'm not! And not likely to be."

Something about the way he knelt there

looking up at her made her glance suddenly waver and drop away. As she walked back to the fire Bill could see that the back of her neck was getting red.

He began whistling.

CHAPTER TWO

Odds-On Fighting Men

IT WAS almost six o'clock that evening when Bill reined the team on down Rifle's crooked street. His saddle was in the wagon, the chestnut was tied on behind and he was sorry the afternoon was ended. Virginia had turned out to be nice as she looked, nicer if possible. Once back there an hour or so ago he had realized she was making him talk as he never had before. He'd never known there were so many words in him as he answered her countless questions. What was the desert like and was it true that Spanish girls down in Santa Fe were more beautiful than any others and what did he know about Cochise and the Army's campaigns against the Chiricuahas?

Her father had served out here somewhere during the War Between The States, fighting Indians mostly, and he got her to tell him what she could remember of his story. It pleased him to watch her as she talked and he'd been doing that back there that time when the team wandered off the road. The wagon was fifty feet to one side of it and jolting over a rock shelf before he noticed. He liked the way she had laughed over his being flustered, the mischievous look that came to her eyes when she told him he'd better mind what he was doing.

Damn, now the drive was over and he would have to be thinking up a reason for seeing her again tomorrow—and the next day and the next, if he had anything to say about it. He hadn't stopped to think out why she was the only girl he'd ever wasted much of a thought over. But such was the fact and he was sort of proud at realizing it.

This was a joke on him, he was thinking, his driving a nester wagon into a cattle town when he'd never before had a thing to do with a nester except maybe to chouse one away from some stream or water hole that belonged to whatever outfit that he happened to be riding for.

That was a tricky point when you came to look at it. None of the cattle outfits really owned the grass they called theirs—or blessed little of it at best. It boiled down to a matter of how much a man could hang onto, how tough he could make it for anyone trying to move in on him. The big spreads stayed big because they could hire big crews and power. Once in a while, like right here on Squaw Creek, a bunch of these homesteaders would try at filing on government land. Sometimes they made it stick, but more often they were pushed on. And if they made a fuss they were likely burned out, shot at, sometimes killed. Bill wondered what the story would be here.

Oddly enough, he didn't mind sitting this wagon and driving the lopsided team for Virginia Rush. Virginia. He liked the name. Sounded right on a man's tongue. Gin or Jenny weren't too bad either. Maybe when he really got to know her he'd call her Virg, which was best of all.

His thoughts came back to the present at sight of a slack-sitting man astride a buckskin horse heading up the street toward the wagon. It was the horse first of all that took his eye. The animal could almost be put alongside the chestnut and hold up its head. A little skimpy in the barrel, maybe, but a nice piece of horseflesh nevertheless. Then Bill noticed the way the man was riding the animal. And the bile rose in him.

A MAN can punish a horse without striking him and Bill saw at once that this man was punishing the buckskin. The way he sat cocked to the side in the saddle threw the animal off stride. And as he came on up to the wagon he kept yanking at the reins, making the horse toss his head in a way that was pretty to see but that made no sense when Bill noticed the ornate spade bit.

He could almost feel the cruel jab of that bit against his own tongue as the stranger came abreast the wagon's team, calling out, "Howdy, folks. Welcome to Rifle. Now if you'll keep right on down to the end of the street, I've got a nice camp ground laid out. Wood for your fire and water aplenty. Vance is the name. Theodore Vance. Glad you're here."

Theodore Vance had a too-hearty manner and an obvious flair for words. He was completely bogus for Bill's money. His gray eyes were set too close in to the bridge of his hawkish nose and their cool gaze didn't back his outward affability. He was a narrow-built scarecrow of a man somewhere in his middle thirties and clad in black. His face had a sallow look, probably from too much bad whiskey.

But worst of all was that way he sat his saddle all out of kilter, mistreating the horse with the bit. With most horses that wouldn't have mattered to Bill. But to treat a good one this way got his dander up.

By now he had reined in and Vance had stopped. It was Virginia who answered the land agent, saying pleasantly, "I'm Virginia Rush. Has my brother seen you?"

"Certainly has, he certainly has, Virginia. Pat's already gone out to look things over. Said to tell you he'd be back after dark. Now you two come along and I'll show you where to put the wagon." He glanced at Bill and asked brusquely, "Who's this?"

"Bill Wells. He helped me fix the wagon today," Virginia said. And Bill noticed a decided coolness in her tone, understanding that she too had taken some slight offense at Vance having addressed her so familiarly.

Vance turned now, saying in a lordly way, "Follow me," and led the way down the rough street.

This was a hill town and the street needed some dirt hauled in to smooth the exposed ledges of rock. The wagon began jolting and Bill had to stand on the brake now and then to keep from running over his team.

This news about Pat not being here wasn't so good. It had worried Bill all day to think Virginia had a brother loco enough to let her in for a thing like driving an awkward team by herself. Didn't the fool know that all kinds of riff-raff were in the country now, swarming to Rifle to feed on Vance's sugary offer? Once in a while there were even Indians busting off their reservations. A white woman alone in this country was an unheard-of thing. So far as Bill knew there wasn't a carbine or a shotgun, even a hand-gun, back there under the wagon's 'tarp. Except his own, of course, which he had taken off and rolled up and thrust into a comforter behind the seat. It seeming the polite thing to do so long as he was sitting alongside Virginia.

So he didn't think much of Pat Rush, what little he knew of him, and what Vance had just told them didn't improve his opinion much. Virginia had told him that Pat had worked out here five years, "riding to cows," as she put it. Then along early in the spring she'd had this letter from him sending her railway fare, along with one of Vance's throw-aways, urging her to give up teaching in Alton and come out here to take up a homestead with him; two homesteads, in fact, for she was just of age and he wanted her to file on one along with him. Pat must have given her a tall story about what she'd find, because no girl in her right mind—especially one who'd never worked with her hands—would let herself in for this life if she knew the least bit about it. This was a man's country, still wild in a lot of ways, lusty and bawdy in a great many more, with short summers and killing winters. It was no place for a town-bred girl.

They were rolling down between the false-front stores and saloons now. A few lights were already on in the windows and the walks were crowded in front of the saloons. There were saddle horses and light rigs tied at the hitch-rails and Bill idly noticed that every now and then Vance's head would bob or he'd lift a hand as he greeted someone along the awninged walks.

Suddenly a high-pitched feminine voice screeched out over all the other sounds, "Hiyuh, hay-seed! Who you got there, Vance? Tell him to pull the straw out of his ears! Hey, farm boy, leave that hoity-toity thing and come on in and have a drink!"

Bill looked over and saw who had called, a woman leaning in a second floor window over a saloon, the Trail. He felt his face go hot and growled, "Someone ought to shut her mouth." But then he had to grin, for he saw Virginia was doing her best to keep from laughing.

"I'm the one that's the hay-seed, Bill," she said. "You can't be enjoying this

much. These people know that I'm green."

He looked quickly around at her. "If I wasn't d'you think I'd be here? Besides, there—"

BILL never had a chance to finish. For just now, with the woman at the saloon calling out again, the wagon gave an abrupt lurch. The seat dropped from under Bill, he came down hard on it again and then Virginia was sliding down against him. He'd have fallen out, she on top of him, but for his grabbing a hold on the seat-brace.

There they sat, the wagon tilted awkwardly down on its side, one wheel lying flat to the ruts.

He said, "Damn!" and this time Virginia saw nothing out of the way in his language; she even had the feeling it might help to repeat his word.

Vance had stopped and was looking around, surprised, as Bill swung aground to regard the freshly-broken rear axle. Bill was smiling and Virginia found she liked his look when it was this way as he glanced up at her and drawled, "Well, it got us here anyway. Now you can get it fixed proper."

The woman over the saloon was laughing bawdily now, cackling, "Get that junk off the street. You're blockin' the way, sodbuster!" and Vance was coming on back with a look of scowling impatience as Bill squatted down to survey the damage.

The axle was broken clear through, he saw, and if it weren't for three or four windings of the barb-wire still holding it together the whole thing would have gone over when the wheel came off.

Wrathful impotence held Bill as he sized up the situation. The wagon blocked the street. It had slewed around and there was barely room enough at either side for saddle horses to get past. Already a spring-wagon was stopped close above, waiting to pass. People were gathering on both walks, there was a lot of laughing and jeering that Bill sensed was directed chiefly at Vance, not at these homesteaders he'd brought in. Usually in a spot like this the onlookers would have been only too willing to help. But not a man came out to offer any.

Now six punchers, obviously together and probably from the same outfit, sauntered out from the front of the Trail between two tied ponies and stood close by watching amusedly. One of these—a thick-set man with bowed legs and a chest full and deep as a nail keg—eyed the cocked-over wagon and team and Bill heard him say idly, "You can't file on that quarter-section, stranger. The town council would raise hell."

There were a few more laughs, Vance's angry voice sounding over them, "Horse, mind you no trouble now!"

Bill walked over and offered Virginia a hand. "Better get down," he said. "This thing may go on over."

Her face was red with embarrassment as she took his hand and stepped lightly down off the wheel-hub. The man Horse took this moment to reach up and, with a grand gesture, doff his flat-brimmed hat and throw his arm across his waist, making a low bow, drawling, "Prince Charmin' and his lady! Light from your carriage, Princess."

The crowd loved it and a ripple of stronger laughter sounded from both walks. Bill's hard glance rocked around to Horse. But Horse was ignoring him now as he put his hat back on and, with a look of meaning, said to his men, "Boys, we could help make some room here."

Vance heard that and his indignant look changed to one of alarm. All he could think of was to repeat his warning of a moment ago, but this time in a pleading voice. "No trouble now, gents! Let 'em be!"

Horse winked broadly at the others. "Fred," he said, "lay some iron on our friend Ted here."

He had no sooner spoken than one of the others, a thin, slat-bodied individual, leisurely drew a long-barreled Navy Colt's from his belt, cocked it and lined it at the land agent. "Stay there, Ted," Horse said. And with that the other five, led by Horse, made for the wagon.

All at once Bill knew what they intended. His temper came wickedly on edge and his right hand dropped to thigh. But all he felt there was the empty expanse of his pants leg. His gun, of course, was in the wagon. A feeling of helplessness and bafflement flooded through him. He looked at Virginia. The blazing defi-

ance she directed at the punchers made him wince at what he knew was coming.

Then, and afterward, he knew that a woman had no place horning in on such a thing. A woman mixing in such a setup robs it of its male dignity. Nevertheless, just now as Horse and his friends walked in toward her, Virginia said, "You touch this wagon and I'll have you all arrested!"

Horse stopped in his tracks, the others with him. The crowd went suddenly quiet with expectancy. Mock surprise came to Horse's blunt face. He said, "We're at your service, ma'am. Just tryin' to oblige you and him." His glance touched Bill scornfully.

IT WAS obvious that his politeness was a sham, that neither he nor the others —nor the crowd, even—had any respect for these two supposed nesters Vance had brought in. That was eloquently demonstrated the next moment as a man behind Horse remarked tartly, "Let's get on with it." And he came on past Horse. Then they were all moving in again.

Virginia cried, "Bill, don't let them do it!"

Horse was almost abreast him when Bill made a last attempt at staving the thing off. "Everything here belongs to the girl," he said. "This'll be rough on her."

But Horse only gave him a look of disgust, asking dryly, "Hidin' behind your woman's skirts, fella?"

Bill gave way to an instant's reckless urge. He thrust out a boot and tripped Horse. As the man went off-balance Bill lifted a long, looping uppercut, all the weight of his heavy shoulders behind his fist. His knuckles caught Horse along the shelf of the jaw and Horse went down loosely, never having caught himself since his boots tangled.

Bill barely had the time to swing around on the next man before a third was piling onto his back. He staggered, tried to double over and throw the man. But the weight was too much for him and he went on over and sprawled face down into the gravel. Another piled down on him and while they held him—one with knees at his shoulders, the other sitting on his legs—the two remaining men went on.

Bill heard the axle crack. There was a squealing of boards. Virginia was crying out something. Vance was shouting lustily and the crowd was letting out a roar of delight. Then the man on top of Bill beat his face down into the gravel and his senses went reeling.

He was drowsily aware of the weight leaving his back and legs. He opened his eyes and lifted his head, tasting the salty tang of blood on his lips. Close beside him he heard Virginia sobbing, saying, "Won't someone even bring him a drink of water?"

Then after several more seconds rough hands rolled him onto his back and the shock of cold water splashing in his face brought Bill around, gagging for breath. He sat up awkwardly, wiping the water from his face, feeling a pain in his nose and mouth.

He stared about in bewilderment. Virginia stood there looking down at him with a pitying glance. A black-garbed man was alongside her, a star showing at the pocket of a gray vest under his coat. Beyond, showing indistinctly against the dusk, Bill could see people milling around the wagon. The wagon lay on its side now, the spokes of its cocked wheel etched against the darkening cobalt of the already star-studded sky.

"Better?" asked the man with Virginia.

"Yeah."

Bill got his knees under him and managed to stand. He was feeling mad again, and for a moment his eyes scanned the faces of the crowd, looking for Horse and the others. When he didn't see them he said, "A hell of a thing, Sheriff, lettin' 'em kick a woman around this way."

The man's dour expression didn't break as he drawled, "I didn't let 'em do anything. I was down there at Vance's camp sortin' out some other trouble when this happened. You feel all right?"

It was embarrassing to have Virginia step up now and wipe the blood from his face with her handkerchief as he was answering, "Sure. Where's Vance? And this Horse and his crowd?"

"Gone, all of 'em. They had to carry Horse away. Fella, you could've done better than to get Crow Track riled at you. You're going to be livin' with 'em a long time up Squaw way if you settle here."

Virginia turned and said, "I've already

told you this man isn't with me, Sheriff. He was only helping."

"So he was," the lawman said tiredly. "Well, this is just one more thing. There's five times as many people down there as can settle up Squaw Creek. So Vance is sickin' 'em in on Cable, on land that's rightly Crow Track's." He gave Bill a harassed look, his seamed and mustached face set doggedly. "I'm sure sorry there's no one to help you, stranger. But these people ain't in a mind to do much for Vance."

"We'll get along," Bill drawled.

He walked over to the wagon now and reached in to find the comforter. There was a trunk lying on it and he had to lift the trunk before he could get at his gun. He jerked it out, his temper still at the boil, and facing the loose circle of curious onlookers he belted on the weapon. Then he eyed the crowd, asking, "Anyone got stomach enough to lend a hand here?"

FIRST one man, then a second, stepped sheepishly in on the wagon. Bill drawled, "Thanks, the rest of you," in a dry way that brought still another. Then someone said, "Come on, let's all pitch in," and before Bill realized it there were a dozen men at either end of the wagon lifting it upright again. Someone rolled an empty beer barrel across from the Trail and put it where the missing wheel should have been. Then a burly individual with a full spade beard was stepping up to Bill to ask, "You want me to do the iron work? My forge is still hot."

"Sure. And much obliged."

"If you'd get on down to Ramsey's real quick he might let you have an axle."

"Who's Ramsey?"

"Hardware store. On down there past that big light."

The blacksmith walked down the street with Bill, and Ramsey let him have the axle, which he lugged back up to the wagon by himself. In no time at all the blacksmith was there bolting on the new axle. The whole thing didn't take longer than half an hour, with so many hands helping, and when Bill finally paid off the blacksmith and helped Virginia back up onto the seat the crowd gave them a ragged cheer.

They were below, near the single cross-street, when Bill really looked at Virginia for the first time since he had picked himself out of the street. "Not so bad after all, eh?"

"The fools!" she blazed. "I could have killed them." Abruptly her anger died out. "Thank you for what you did to that one man, Bill."

He chuckled softly. "Put him to sleep, did I?"

She nodded and her look became grave. "Your face, Bill. Doesn't it hurt?"

"No." He noticed they were coming down on a building with a faded sign across its false front, RANGE HOUSE, and he asked, "Hadn't you better put up at the hotel?"

"Of course not," she said. "I'll want to be with Pat. We have a tent and I'm no better than the rest of these people. Where do you suppose the camp ground is?"

"We'll have a look."

They found the vacant lot Vance was using for his homesteaders down by the creek at the bottom of the street. Five supper fires were burning and Bill found room for the wagon along the lot's back fence. Their arrival attracted several homesteader families who had doubtless heard of what had happened up the street. Several men helped Bill unload the things Virginia needed and then set the inside of the wagon to rights.

He was finished and throwing his saddle on the chestnut when Virginia noticed and came across from the fire. "You're not staying for supper?"

"Thought I'd mosey on up the street and eat a bite."

"You'll do no such thing," she insisted.

So he let the cinch hang loose and tied the chestnut to the wagon again, then went on over to the creek to wash up. The water made the cuts on his face smart and for a minute or two he wondered if his nose was broken. But it seemed all right, solid enough, and now he could look back on the ruckus and get a little satisfaction out of remembering the solid feel of the punch he'd handed Horse. The man's jaw would be sore a sight longer than it would take the scratches on his own face to heal and it was good to be able to think that.

Virginia acted differently over their

supper. She seemed shy and didn't often look straight at him and now they both seemed to find a hard time scraping up anything to say.

It was Virginia who finally worded the thought that was troubling both of them. "Where are you headed from here, Bill?"

He shrugged. "No place in particular."

There was a momentary gladness in her eyes. "You might stay here then?" she had asked before seeing how transparent her words were. Then she added quietly, "No, I suppose there's nothing to keep you."

"Might ask around and see if any of the big layouts need an extra man," he said. "Trouble is, calfin's over and they're layin' off their crews instead of hirin'. Maybe I'll just drift on to a fresh place."

SHE HAD nothing to say to that and he wondered at his own orneriness at having told her what he had. Then he gradually realized it was his wanting to be sure she'd like to see more of him that made him speak the first thing that came to mind. Well, if her look of disappointment now meant what he thought it did, he had his answer. He was sure going to look around for a job here, he told himself.

When he couldn't think of another excuse for staying at her fire—when the dishes were done and put away and her tent pitched and his second smoke finished—he drawled, "Well, got to be movin'. Sure you don't want me to hang around until Pat gets back?"

She smiled up at him. "No. I'm going to get some sleep, Bill." She sobered and added softly, "You were fine to help the way you did. Pat will want to thank you. Where will you be?"

"No tellin'."

She stood up now, offering him her hand. "Maybe we'll see more of you, Bill."

"Maybe."

She came over to the chestnut with him and he was tightening the cinch when she made more words, trying to take away the awkwardness of their parting. "If you're ever back through here again, stop up along Squaw Creek to see us."

He stepped into the saddle, his lean face slashed with its infectious grin. "By that time you'll have a man. He might not look kindly on a stray droppin' in to see you."

"He would certainly make you welcome!" she said with surprising vehemence. "Besides, there won't be any man except Pat."

"Now you don't count on bein' an old maid, do you, Virginia?"

That was a fool thing to ask, he was thinking. And the answer he got threw the thing strictly in his lap as she said, "It's up to the right man, Bill."

He could have asked her if she'd run onto the right man yet, but didn't, unaccountably flustered at the prospect of what she might say. So all he did was rein the gelding out, lift a hand and drawl, "See you later," and ride back out to the street again.

The idea of sleeping in a hotel room didn't appeal to him. He put the chestnut in the livery barn, gave the hostler fifty cents extra, and crawled up into the loft. For a long time he lay there thinking about the day, about Vriginia.

His last waking thought was, Now wouldn't it stack the deck if Crow Track would hire me on?

CHAPTER THREE

Gun Minister

PART of Bill Wells' philosophy was that doing the unexpected sometimes paid off. So that next morning, after a brief look downstreet at the smoke haze of the homesteader fires, he got a breakfast at a restaurant, asked his way to Crow Track and took a trail west from town into the lower foothills. He wasn't in a hurry and the twelve-mile ride took him almost two hours.

Riding in on Crow Track's headquarters, he was impressed by the look of the layout which lay in a bay of the timber heading a mile-long meadow of lush grass. A clutter of buildings and corrals surrounded the main house, which was set against the backdrop of the pines and was L-shaped, built of logs.

Almost the first man he saw as he was riding abreast the biggest of the corrals was Horse. The man was afoot, walking between the barn and what Bill assumed

was the bunkhouse. He saw Bill, stopped and turned squarely to face him. And Bill, more amused than grudging over what he remembered of the fight there on the street in Rifle, rode straight in on him.

Bill reined in half a dozen yards short of the man, folded his hands on the horn of the saddle, grinned down and said, "If you think I'm here lookin' for trouble, have another guess."

The look of stoniness that had been etched on Horse's face melted slightly. It took him a full five seconds to say, "I never make guesses. What's on your mind?"

"A job, friend. A job."

Horse gave a visible start. "You? Work here?" he asked. "For me? Hell, man, I rod this outfit!"

"Makes no difference," Bill said. "I'm lookin' for work. If you're so much of an old woman you can't forget a lucky punch someone landed on you in a ruckus you started yourself, then I had a wrong hunch ridin' all this way."

"Who says I'm an old woman?"

Horse instinctively reached up to the swelling alongside his jaw. It was then that Bill's infectious grin seemed to crack the shell of the man's reserve, for he drawled ruefully, "Brother, you'd remember if you'd been on the receivin' end of that mule kick. Maybe it was luck, maybe not." He eyed Bill respectuflly a moment before asking, "What can you do?"

"Rope, break or shoe cayuses, mend fence, dig post holes, milk cows, drill a well, cut timber, de-horn steers, butcher out a—"

"Whoa!" Horse cut in, smiling now. "Unless you're a liar, I could fire the crew and sit back to watch you run the outfit yourself." His expresson changed to a serious one. "Fact is, I let three men go last month. From now on all we do till fall is cut and pitch hay along with our regular chores."

"Maybe I didn't mention pitchin' hay. But you never saw a better man with a fork."

Horse frowned. "I don't get it. Thought you were a nester."

Bill shook his head. "Not so long as I'm sound of limb and head. That girl was in trouble yesterday, I helped her out. If I had the time to wait till you got an answer, you could write Andy Havers at the Double X, over Bear Valley way. He'd tell you I'm a top hand. Also lazy, good for nothin."

Horse's look sharpened. "Havers sends a rep over here for round-up every year. You been workin' for him?"

Bill nodded.

"Why'd you quit?"

"Wanted to see some new country."

"This ain't far enough to be new country."

"Depends on how a man looks at it," Bill said. "It's far enough to suit me for a while."

HORSE'S glance was studying Bill closely as he took out a tobacco sack and sifted some of the weed onto a wheat-straw paper. When he tossed the sack across, asking, "Well, how about it?" the move startled Horse, caught him off guard.

For Horse's thinking was working along an odd channel now and he spoke before a certain idea was quite formed, drawling, "We got more help then we rightly should have. Except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"Someone with a level head to deal with these grangers filin' on that Squaw Creek stretch. I can't get along with 'em, neither can any the rest of the boys."

"They're just plain folks, Horse."

"So they tell me." Anger toughened the look of Horse's blocky face. "But when one of 'em runs me off my own grass with a rifle I don't quite know how to take it."

"That happened?"

Horse nodded. "Yesterday afternoon, clear the hell and gone up in the hills. A mile or so above the line the boss set as the highest these nesters could go. Young fella up there was pilin' rock to mark one corner of his quarter-section. I was real polite tellin' him he was in the wrong spot. So he reaches behind this tree and the first thing I know I'm lookin' down the bore of a .30-30. Mighty convincin', it was."

Bill thought a moment. "So that'd be my job, dealin' with hotheads like that?"

Horse's head tilted in the affirmative. "That or nothin'. The boss is dead set against startin' any trouble. We think he's gone loco, treatin' these sodbusters so

kindly. Burn a few ounces of powder now instead of a few pounds later, we say. But the old man sees it different."

"Then I'd have the job of mollycoddlin' all hands and keepin' everybody in a spirit of brotherly love?"

"That's about it," Horse said. "You'd have maybe the same chance as a tumbleweed in a dust devil. And you'd get fired so quick your head would sing if you made a wrong move. Lord, man, I been expectin' to get my walkin' papers any day. If the boss hears about that ruckus in town with you yesterday I may be on my way out."

Bill weighed the man's pessimistic tone along with the prospects of the proffered job. They were anything but pleasant to contemplate, familiar as he was with the thousand and one prickly points working against any meeting of minds between cattlemen and homesteaders. Still, he was remembering Virginia right now and it didn't take him many seconds to say, "Horse, you just hired yourself a minister of state. What's the first chore you got for him?"

It took Horse even less time to give his answer. "Go up there along Squaw, find that stray if he's still there, and move him down where he belongs."

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Man's Claim

FOLLOWING Horse's directions, around noon Bill set out across the hills headed for Squaw Creek, forking a Crow Track branded steeldust bronc and a week's supply of Crow Track grub in his bedroll. He would twice each day ride the line of a certain fence that marked the uppermost limit to which the homesteaders might file. Horse was leaving it entirely up to him on how to move out anyone who tried to come above this fence.

"Handle 'em gentle," Horse had told him somewhat worriedly as they parted. "Otherwise, you lose your job and I lose mine." He added that Bill was to use one of Crow Track's line shacks up Squaw as his headquarters.

As it turned out, Bill never did see that line shack.

For Horse had asked him first to ride past the spot where the rebellious nester had been putting up his location marker the afternoon before. Bill found the marker easily enough. And, close by, he found something else.

The man lay face down in a patch of pine seedlings not twenty feet from the monument he had erected. He might have been sleeping, Bill thought at first, until he noticed the way the blond head was cocked around, propped awkwardly off the ground by one bentover seedling in a position that would have been unbearable to a live man. Then he saw the red smear patterning the torn back of the brown flannel shirt and he breathed involuntarily, "Horse, begin packin' your possibles!"

A small suspcion grew into a terrible certainty less than two minutes later, after he'd come aground and moved away enough from the monument to uncover a tomato can buried underneath. The can contained a scrap of paper. On the paper, written in a crude hand, was a notice proclaiming this monument to be a corner marked of half a section of land, two homestead claims filed on by—Patrick and Virginia Rush.

Sight of those names made Bill catch his breath. He exhaled a slow sigh and, tossing the can aside, walked over and took his deliberate look at Pat Rush. Although the face was set stonily in death, the blue eyes open and staring, there still remained a certain carefree rashness of expression that told Bill he would have liked Pat.

Turning away, Bill looked at his watch. "Two hours and thirty-four minutes," he drawled softly. "Shortest time you ever worked for any one outfit, fella."

He found Pat's horse, a gray, staked out on a patch of grass close alongside the creek several rods to the east. A saddle and bedroll hung from a lower branch of a thin-leaf cottonwood close by. Bill left the saddle where it was and used the bedroll tarp to wrap the body in. The gray was skittish and nervous about taking the load; but finally Bill had it roped on securely. When he left the spot, he was in his own saddle leading the gray.

There was a gate through Crow Track's fence a mile below. Less than three hundred yards beyond that he came to the first homesteader camp. Two men, a

woman and a pair of kids eyed him suspiciously as he rode in on their crude lean-to and, reining in just short of them, announced unceremoniously, "Got a dead man here. Any of you know Pat Rush?"

"Rush?" echoed the oldest of the men. "Sure. He come by here yesterday at dinner time. Et with us." Suddenly his eyes widened. "That's him you got there?"

Bill nodded. His head was still moving when the second man made a dive for the lean-to and a rifle that stood slanted against its front post.

Bill lifted the .45 from his thigh in no special hurry. As it dropped into line, the man halted abruptly in his tracks and lifted his hands.

"Now let's keep off the prod," Bill drawled. "If I'd done Pat in, would I be here now?"

The homesteader gulped, his Adam's apple bobbing along his scrawny neck as he said stubbornly, "You would be if you was warnin' us off like Pat said one of your bunch tried to yesterday."

"Well, you can have another guess," Bill said mildly, holstering his weapon. "All I'm after's help. If one of you would take Pat on down to town, the other might come along and help me look things over up there. The sheriff ought to get up here fast as he can."

"Along with Vance," the other put in.

Bill nodded. "Suit yourself about Vance. But bring the law." He judged that the one who had been headed for the rifle had by now forgotten it, and with this assurance his eyes left the man and he swung aground.

When he looked back toward the lean-to again it was to see the Winchester at the man's shoulder. The cold look of the eye staring over the sights warned him against moving even before the homesteader drawled, "Grab for some sky, stranger! There's nothin' I'd like better than to put you alongside Pat! Just try goin' for that hogleg!"

Bill's hands lifted slowly to the level of his shoulders. The older man came around behind him and jerked his Colt from his thigh.

As the hard snout of the .45 jabbed against his spine, the homesteader behind said, "Easy, Sam. We'll take him on in. Now I know how we're goin' to stretch that new rope we bought yesterday."

RIFLE'S jail was as solid as any Bill had ever seen, as dark and dank and cold as a root-cellar. The only source of ventilation was the chimney of the rusted stove and a crack over the nail-studded oak door that must have been four inches thick. The room's only light came also through that crack between the door and its frame.

Bill had remarked dryly on this fact when the sheriff was locking him in, saying, "Keep me in here and I'll go blind. Like a mule in a mine. How about a lantern, Sheriff?"

"So you can burn your way out? Unh-uh," had been the lawman's terse answer. "And you needn't worry about goin' blind. Takes a mine mule years for his eyes to go back on him. You won't live near that long."

"Then how about something to lie on?"

"You got nothin' to rest up for except that climb up those thirteen steps."

With that acid rejoinder, Sheriff Holly had closed the door, bolted and locked it. And over the four hours that had passed since then the feeling that he was in a tomb had gradually come to Bill. Now and then he could catch faint sounds from the street which lay a little over a hundred yards below, beyond the alley that led up this hill. At first he had built one cigarette after another. Then finally his throat became parched and he realized he must do something else to work off his nervous energy.

So he had tried to think his way out of here. But he had to discard idea after idea until finally no other would come. Riding up from the street with his hands manacled to the horn of his saddle he had noticed carefully that the jail was built of rock slabs, roofed with at least three feet of solid earth over its log joists and the back third of its depth dug deep into the face of a steep hill. One day he was to learn that the building had many years ago been a fort erected by the beaver trader who had been the town's first citizen; but just now he knew only that it seemed as indestructible as a granite boulder.

He had asked to see Virginia. The sheriff had turned him down flatly.

"Hound that girl when she's already half crazy with heartache? Son, you've got snow in your veins!"

But he couldn't keep Virginia out of his thoughts any more than he could help wondering at the way Pat had died. Now that it was all over he was regretting a few things. First, if he had it to do over again, he would spend a lot of time looking around up there near Pat's monument, looking for sign, anything that would point to who the killer could have been. And next, instead of bringing Pat's body on down as he had, he'd ride straight to Crow Track and have it out with Horse. Try as he would not to suspect Horse, he couldn't help but wonder just how much of the story the man had given him was true, how much false. Had Horse sized him up as a fool and sent him across there to take the blame for a killing he, Horse, had done himself? Or had Horse hired him on good faith, ignorant of what had happened to Pat?

What he wanted most was the chance of talking to Virginia, of hearing her say that she didn't believe what others must be believing, that he was Pat's killer. Thinking of her as she had been yesterday was the thing that steadied him, made him figure he had an even chance of talking his way out of this as soon as tempers cooled enough to let men listen to reason.

THE light shining through the crack in the door was fading when he began hearing sounds he couldn't understand at first. There were many voices, some of them high-pitched, one of them vaguely familiar, echoing up from the direction of the street; and as he listened he finally realized that there must be a crowd down there. Then abruptly he recognized that one familiar voice as belonging to Theodore Vance and a vague apprehension ran through him when the others died away and only Vance's continued on at a high pitch.

It was while Vance was still shouting down there that the padlock rattled against the door. Shortly Bill heard the bolt pulled back and then the heavy door was swinging slowly open, its rusty hinges squealing.

Two figures stood outlined against the gloom of dusk beyond the opening. One was the sheriff and the other Horse. The lawman stood with a drawn Colt in hand and when the door stood wide he planted a hand in the middle of Horse's back and pushed him roughtly toward Bill, at the same time saying ominously, "You two can eat when things have calmed down. If they ever do."

Making sure that Horse was well out of reach, he reached in and started pulling the door shut.

Sight of Horse had roused a quick anger in Bill. Yet now he put that emotion aside to say quickly, "Sheriff, I've got to have a talk with Virginia Rush."

Holly's low laugh was mocking. "You tell him what his chances are, Horse," he drawled. And with that the door slammed shut.

The bolt was grating into place as Bill said tonelessly, "What did he mean?"

"That she won't see you, I reckon. They say she's going along with Ted Vance."

Bill was mystified and his anger toward Horse gone as he asked, "Goin' along with him how?"

"Trying to talk that crowd into throwin'

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a necktie party for us. And they're going to pull it pretty damn quick!"

"For *us?*" Bill was dumbfounded on two counts. "You, too?"

"No one else." Horse's voice sounded ruefully out of the room's blackness. Bill heard him sigh gently before he added, "And, brother, we don't have too much time. That Vance could persuade a tribe of wooden Indians." As though to back his words, they could hear Vance's voice rise to a higher pitch.

"You could let me in on it, whatever it is," Bill drawled.

"Not much to let you in on," Horse said. "The sheriff came across for a talk with me along about four, after he'd been up there on Squaw lookin' around. The minute I owned up to forkin' the nag that made that second set of tracks near where they found Rush, Holly unlimbered his hardware and I was under arrest. When I told him I'd run onto Rust yesterday afternoon, he told me to guess again. He claims either me or you went back there last night, ridin' the same jughead I forked during the afternoon, and 'gulched Rush. Claims I had you run onto Rush this mornin' and bring the body down just to cover what we'd done."

Bill was having to make a lot of guesses to take this all in, for Horse hadn't by any means told him everything. Yet now, regardless of the seriousness of the things Horse was saying, he was remembering Holly's parting words.

"But the Rush girl can't believe all this," he drawled incredulously.

"If she doesn't, she's got a poor way of showin' it," Horse said. "The boss came on in with me. He's weak-kneed, as usual. Went to see the girl. Accordin' to him, she just stood there with her face blank as a clean sheet of paper. When he'd quit talkin', all she said was to tell you she was going to even the score for her brother. Said she'd known all along he hated you."

"All along?" Bill echoed incredulously. "Hated me? How could he when I'd never laid eyes on him?"

"You hadn't?" Horse asked. Then he added uncertainly, stubbornly, "Well, still that's what she said. The old man took particular pains to warn me against you."

HORSE'S brittle laugh told Bill how little stock he was putting in the rancher's belief and Bill was thankful for this slender encouragement as the shock of Virginia's words hit him. His disbelief changed gradually to uncertainty. And then quite suddenly a notion hit him that made him say, "Horse, she's tryin' to tell me something!"

"Sure she is. It's pretty plain. She'd like to see you hang."

"You're wrong," Bill said excitedly. "Don't you get it? I've never before seen her brother. She wants—"

His words broke off momentarily as a shout echoed from the street. Horse said tartly, "This has played straight into that land-hungry son's hand. This afternoon he had the Rush girl file on that land her brother had picked. And he filed on the quarter-section above himself. The boss is so upset over what happened he's agreed to open up that extra mile of Squaw, give up some of the best of his grass. Now Vance is down there usin' the platform behind the Trail like a barker in a tent show. He's got a big crowd listenin' while he preaches justice against the land hogs, meanin' any cow outfit in general and Crow Track in particular. If he can prod 'em into stringin' us up, it'll mean more money in his pocket than he could hope to make in ten years the honest way."

"But this other," Bill said impatiently. "What Virginia said. She's going to even the score for her brother. And she knew all along Pat had hated me. Don't you get it, Horse? She must be onto something. She said that about Pat hatin' me just to let me know things look different than they really are."

"What things?"

"This play she's makin' against me. It don't hold water. She wouldn't have a reason to hate me."

"I don't get it, Wells."

"I don't either. Not quite," Bill had to admit. "But you wait."

"For what?"

Bill sighed, drawling softly, "Wish I knew."

As the next hour dragged past he really did wish he knew what lay behind Virginia's words and actions. For a time he was uncertain of his hunch. Then finally

common sense told him Virginia wouldn't turn against him without good reason. And the circumstances surrounding Pat's death weren't reason enough to have caused that. No, something else lay behind her behavior.

Once Horse went to the door and tried to see out through the slit along its top. But after several seconds he turned away, saying, "Too high. All I can see is the flickerin' of those torches down there. Vance has the valley lined with 'em." They could catch the voices of the crowd now and then and one that spoke over the others, gradually silencing them, Horse identified as Sheriff Holly's. "He's a good man," Horse said. "He'll be tryin' to talk sense into 'em."

But immediately after the lawman's voice went silent, Vance was speaking again and gradually, yet so surely that they could almost picture him tongue-lashing the onlookers, the pitch of his tone rose to a higher note. And other voices occasionally interrupted him with angry shouts.

ENCOURAGED as he had been over the meaning he had put into Virginia's words with Cable, Horse's boss, Bill's hopes now gradually died to leave him bleakly aware of the possibilities the night might bring. Years ago he had seen a mob half kill an innocent man suspected or rustling; this mob—and it would surely become one in the end if Vance kept on with his silver-tongued oratory—had far more provocation than the other and far less to lose in dealing with a man they saw as a killer. Or, rather, with two men.

"Horse," Bill said finally, when the shouting below had become almost continuous, "I'd a hell of a lot rather be in this alone than with you."

"Nothin's goin' to happen," Horse grunted. But his tone lacked conviction.

It was Bill who caught the rattle of the padlock some minutes later. The next second his whisper cut the darkness like a knife. "Get to the other side of the door, Horse!"

He heard the scrape of Horse's boots as he moved in on the door. Then Horse said softly, "Damned if I don't bust a few heads before they put the hemp around my neck!"

The stillness was tense to Bill as he stood flattened to the wall there alongside the door. He gave a start as he heard the bolt thud softly. Then the door hinges were squealing and a narrow wedge of starlight replaced the blackness of the door's rectangle.

One instant he stood crouched forward, knees bent, hands clawed, ready to spring. The next all the tension drained out of him and he was breathing relievedly, gladly, "Virg!" seeing her slender shape silhouetted against the flickering light of the flares glowing in the alley below.

She must have liked his calling her that, for as he stepped into the doorway she cried softly, "Oh, Bill!" Then, before he quite knew it, she was in his arms with her head against his chest, and his face was pressed into the soft mass of her chestnut hair.

He could catch its fragrance and feel her trembling against him, and it was perfectly natural that he should stroke her head gently with one hand, drawling, "We knew you weren't forgetting us, Virg."

She drew away a little now, her head tilted back as she looked up at him. He was surprised to see tears glistening in her eyes as she said in a choked voice, "Bill, everything's gone wrong! If I'd only known!"

"Everything's fine," Bill told her.

He caught her look of astonishment. "When they're down there talking about hanging you?" Her voice was hushed. "When Vance has forgotten what he promised me?"

"And what did he?" Bill asked as he heard Horse move in behind him.

"He was with me when they brought the news of Pat," Virginia said in tones she had a hard time keeping steady. "He believed me when I insisted you were innocent. But he said if I pretended to believe you were guilty that maybe the man who did it would—would overplay his hand, was how he put it. He was sure someone from Crow Track had done it. He said that now was the time to teach all the cattlemen a lesson, to settle all the troubles the homesteaders have been having. It seemed I'd be doing something worthwhile, something Pat would have wanted me to do. So—"

When she hesitated, Bill drawled gently,

"So you went along with him?"

SHE nodded mutely and stood a moment looking up at him, her eyes pleading for his understanding. "Oh, I've said so many terrible things about you, Bill, thinking I was helping these poor people. I even thought Vance was right in paying those four men to take out land adjoining his and mine. He said it was one way of hitting back at Crow Track."

"So he's paid someone to help him grab a section or two of choice graze, has he?" Bill asked tonelessly.

"I don't know what he's done, Bill," she answered in a desperate voice. "Only I do know that it hasn't turned out as I thought it would. Instead of protecting you, as he promised, he's let those people get out of hand. He's down there preaching justice and fair treatment for the homesteaders. He must know that what he says is only strengthening the feeling against you, yet he's doing nothing to stop it. I stood it as long as I could, then made up my mind to see him. I was going to threaten to tell those people how I felt about you if he didn't urge them to be peaceable. I was working my way through the crowd when the sheriff took me aside and gave me the key."

"Gave you the key?" Horse, close behind Bill, asked incredulously.

Virginia nodded. "Sheriff Holly was afraid they'd take it from him. So he asked me to keep it for him until the trouble blew over." She was looking pleadingly at Bill now. "I've broken his trust in coming here, Bill. But I was terribly afraid of what would happen if I didn't."

Bill said, "The luck's all ours. After we're gone, lock the door again and throw the key away. Tell the sheriff you lost it. Then, when they find we've gone, they'll think someone took it from you without your knowing."

"Will you write and let me know you're safe, Bill?" the girl asked. "I'm leaving here, going back to Laramie. I can wait there for a letter."

"I'll come myself instead of a letter."

"You mustn't!" she said quickly. "They'll be hunting you, even in Laramie. You must leave this country."

Bill was staring thoughtfully down at her. "Maybe he's overplayed his hand," he said suddenly.

"Who?" came Horse's blunt question.

When Bill didn't answer at once, Virginia asked, "You know something, Bill?"

"Not for sure." He was trying to think something out; but his suspicion was too indefinite to risk sharing with anyone. Shortly he said, "You're to wait here, not in Laramie, Virg. When you get back down there, pretend to go along with the others. When they find we've lit out, stick as close as you can to Vance. Watch what he does. Don't let him know you think he's done wrong."

"How can I, Bill, when I don't even like him? And what good will it do?"

"Just this much," he told her. "He'll be in the thick of it. Sooner or later you'll hear from me and I'll want to know what's been going on." He reached out and laid a hand on her arm. "Don't worry. Some night soon I'll show up there at your wagon down at the end of the street."

He turned from her now and, nodding to Horse, drawled, "Let's be movin'." Then as Horse came on past him he pulled the door shut, shot the bolt and snapped the padlock. The key was still in the padlock and he took it and threw it as far as he could off to the left, up the hill-slope.

"Give us a two minute start and then walk a big circle getting back down there," he told Virginia as he turned away from her, following Horse into the shadows.

As they were walking away, Virginia called softly, "Be careful, Bill. If anything should happen, I'd—"

He wondered what it was she had started to say.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lion Hound Pack

THEY found the homesteader lot at the bottom of the street dark and deserted, the supper fires burned out. They didn't even have to be quiet in cutting a pair of horses from the bunch in the rope corral at the back of the lot and in helping themselves to a pair of saddles from one wagon.

Horse was all for taking to the hills but Bill insisted on openly riding straight out the west trail toward Crow Track. "We'll make better time," he said.

Yet, once they had started, Bill seemed to be lagging behind. And after the first mile Horse pulled in and waited long enough for Bill to come up even with him, asking tartly, "What's the matter, your nag no good?"

"Sure he's good."

"Then why hang back?"

It was a long moment before Bill replied. And then he didn't answer the question but asked one of his own. "What you said about the sheriff thinkin' you'd gone back last night after Pat Rush, Horse. He found sign to prove it?"

"Sign to prove someone had gone in there. But not me. brother!"

"You know," Bill mused, "I'd like a look at that sign."

His words brought Horse's head swinging sharply around. And even in the faint starlight the Crow Track ramrod's expression showed strong amazement. "You'd what?"

"Like to go up there and look over that sign. Might tell us something."

Horse was quick to say, "Not me! I'm headed over the pass just slow enough to keep from killin' this jughead."

"Okay, then you better get a move on," Bill drawled. "I'll just mosey along up Squaw and have my look."

"And have 'em corral you sometime tomorrow? If," Horse added, "they don't do it sometime tonight."

"By that time it won't matter much," Bill said. "By that time I'll have found what I'm after."

"Which is what?"

"Can't tell you yet for sure."

They fell silent, riding on at the leisurely trot Bill had been holding ever since leaving the town behind. Horse made no move to pull on ahead now. Bill sensed an indefinable air of tension building between them, and what he could make out of Horse's expression in the poor light showed him the man's face set dourly in anger.

Quite suddenly Horse burst out, "All right, I'll play the fool with you! But we don't have to take all night to do it!"

Bill chuckled softly and lifted his animal to a faster trot. From then on neither man spoke. But when they came to the fork that angled north toward Squaw Creek, Horse swung into it ahead of Bill.

They were three-quarters of an hour riding the several miles up the Squaw Creek trail to the gate in Crow Track's fence, and another ten minutes beyond that to the monument Pat Rush had built yesterday to mark the corner of his quarter-section. All this way Horse had set the pace and now he reined in close to the marker's dark pyramid shape and waited for Bill, saying as he came alongside, "If you don't waste too much time we can still make it over the pass before sun-up."

"Yeah," Bill said absently as he swung aground. He looked first to the left, then creekward, asking shortly, "Now where's this sign?"

"Mine or the other ranny's?" Horse asked impatiently.

"Both. Yours first."

Horse swung his animal over twenty feet or so beyond the pile of rock. "Here's about where mine would be. Rush didn't even give me the chance to get down out of my hull."

Bill walked on over, dropping the reins to ground-halter his horse. And when he was close to the Crow Track man he reached to a pocket of his shirt, took out a match and thumbed it alight, stooping over to study the ground.

Horse said quickly, harshly, "Kill that light! You want 'em to spot us?"

"How'm I going to see without it?"

"See what?"

"Can't tell yet."

HORSE grunted in impatience, said worriedly, "Then get on with it," and watched as Bill held the match close to the ground and, bent over, walked a deliberate circle.

Abruptly Bill stopped and went to his knees. His match went out and he lit another. And presently he asked, "A flared shoe? The righ front toed in some?"

"That'll be the one," Horse said. "That mare got a bad kick from a stallion a year or so back. Thought she was crippled for good. But she came around fine."

"Now where did the law find the other sign—the tracks you made when you came back last night to get Rush?" Bill was grinning as he said this last.

"I shot him from behind that bunch of trees down there, accordin' to Holly," was

Horse's dry answer. And he nodded creekward toward a clump of pines.

Bill walked down there, the ramrod following, sitting slack in the saddle. When they reached the trees, Bill asked, "About here?"

"No. Behind 'em."

Bill walked around to the far side of the pines and there repeated what he had done out by the monument, lighting a match, walking slowly about looking at the ground.

Suddenly there came a sound, distant and muted, that made Bill straighten and stand quite still. Horse turned in the saddle and stiffened. The sound came once more, deep-noted, eerie. Then Horse breathed, "God A'mighty! That'll be Overholt's pack of lion hounds. Brother, let's make tracks!"

But Bill, after hearing the baying of the hounds ride the distance once more, said, "You go, Horse. I'm stayin'." And he had no more than spoken before he lit another match.

Horse drew in a quick breath. Then he caught himself and the way he eyed Bill was strange, with a blend of helpless anger and respect. He saw Bill studying the ground again, saw him go to his knees as he had above near the spot where Pat Rush's body had been found.

Then Bill was saying, "Here it is. Same animal."

"Look, Bill," Horse said with a barely-controlled impatience. "I've seen those dogs of Overholt's tear a bear to pieces so small there wasn't a hunk of fur left big enough to cover a man's hand. If we ride the creek a ways, then cut for the high country, we can still get away from them."

"From what?"

"Gettin' our necks stretched, damn it!"

Bill took time to light another match before he drawled, "There's no chance of that now, Horse. I know who did it."

"What?" Horse asked in an awed voice. "You know who killed Rush?"

Bill nodded, nothing more.

And after a few seconds Horse burst out, "Come on, tell me!"

Bill shook his head. "No, don't think I will. Provin' it's going to be something else again. And I'd rather you couldn't give it away."

HORSE was about to protest that when the howling of the hounds sounded again, much closer now. Very faintly across the stillness echoed the hoof-drum of running horses and that sound put a look of alarm on Horse's face. He said soberly, "Bill, you better either get onto your nag again or climb a tree. In about three minutes this place'll be swarmin' with the closest thing you ever saw to a pack o' wolves!"

Bill nodded, flicked the match aside and walked away. When he was back again, astride his horse, the Crow Track man said feelingly, "Hope you know what you're doin'."

"I do. But it'd help if we had some light." Bill had no sooner spoken than he was swinging around once more.

Horse knew better than to ask what he was doing and simply sat there until all at once Bill lit another match. When the light flared abruptly, Horse saw that Bill had touched off several handfuls of pine needles. Next, Bill collected several branches and, breaking them into small pieces, tossed them onto the small blaze.

The dogs were baying fiercely now, their howls lifting to a high yapping note as they scented their quarry. Reluctantly almost, Bill took that warning and climbed astride his horse once more. And less than ten seconds later the first pair of hounds burst through a nearby alder thicket and raced down into the light of the fire.

Both Bill and Horse had their hands full for the next minute as the other dogs came on it, tonguing excitedly as they joined the first pair in snapping at the horses' heels. Both animals pitched and tossed and reared and Horse's tried to bolt but was hauled back close to the blaze that now burned more brightly.

Abruptly a rider appeared around the edge of the alders. It was Theodore Vance astride his leggy buckskin and he rode with a Colt in hand, leveling it at Bill and Horse, shouting, "Reach, you two!"

They tried to obey but were too busy managing their mounts to be able to let go the reins. And presently Vance turned and bawled loudly, "Over here! I got 'em!" at the same time keeping his distance.

Three more riders appeared as suddenly as Vance had, one coming aground

and calling the dogs, cursing them into obedience until finally their clamor quieted and Bill and Horse could control their animals.

Vance said again, "Lift your hands!"

"Why?" Horse wanted to know. "We aren't packin' irons." And he looked at the others.

Vance's narrow face contorted in rage. He was close to Horse and all at once reined his buckskin in on the Crow Track man. He struck so quickly that Bill's warning cry of, "Watch it, Horse!" came a split second too late. By that time the barrel of the Colt had whipped down at the side of Horse's head. And Horse, after a brief grimace of pain, sagged sideways in the saddle and fell to the ground.

Another mounted figure rode into the light a moment later. It was Sheriff Holly. He drawled, "Was that called for, Ted?" and with a glance of distaste at Vance came down off his horse and walked over to the unconscious Crow Track ramrod.

He was kneeling there alongside Horse when the rattle of a light rig's tires against gravel sounded across the momentary stillness. Then Bill saw a team of horses moving in on the others. They were pulling a buckboard and as it came into the stronger light he saw two figures sitting the seat. One was the homesteader who had taken him in to the sheriff this morning. The other person was Virgina Rush.

Vance also noticed their arrival and as the team came to a halt he called, "Sam, turn around and take her back to your place. A woman's got no place here."

IT WAS Virginia who answered, "I'm staying. You're doing nothing to these men until they have a chance to explain." And to back her words she stepped down to the wheel-hub and then aground. She walked over into the stronger light until she stood alongside Sheriff Holly, giving Vance a defiant stare.

For a moment he seemed uncertain. Then his glance shuttled to Bill. "You, Wells," he said crisply. "Get down."

Bill swung deliberately from his saddle and one of the dogs started for him only to be stopped by a shout from the man who had been busy tying them to a rope leash.

"Now," Vance drawled, "first you'll tell us who busted you out of that jail."

Bill ignored Vance, turning to Holly and Virginia. "Sheriff," he said, "we came up here hoping to find something to give us a line on who killed Pat Rush. This afternoon you told Horse that someone had come back here last night and shot Pat. Since—"

"Why do we have to listen to him?" Vance interrupted hotly. He reached for the coil of rope tied below the horn of his saddle now in a gesture of unmistakable

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meaning. Vance meant to hang them quick.

Then one of the others spoke up, saying mildly, "Hell, Ted, let him talk if he wants. He can't get away."

"Sure, let him," another said. "Even a guilty man's got the right to have his say."

And as their attention centered on Bill again, Sheriff Holly asked, "What are you trying to tell us, Wells?"

"This man that got Pat last night," Bill said, "rode right in here behind these trees, accordin' to what you told Horse this afternoon."

The lawman nodded. "That's the way it looked to me."

"And he forked the same animal Horse had during the afternoon, didn't he?"

Once again Holly nodded.

Bill turned away and took several steps back toward the pines. There he went down on one knee, pointing. "Here's his tracks. Take a look at 'em, Sheriff."

Frowning in puzzlement, Holly came on across. The fire's flickering light reached far enough so that he could see the hoofprints as Bill drawled, "Take a good look."

Holly studied the markings on the ground a long moment, saying finally, "Yes, those are the ones."

Bill looked back over his shoulder. "You too, Vance."

Theodore Vance hesitated before finally coming down out of his saddle and walking across to join Bill and the sheriff. He still carried the gun in his hand and made it a point to keep out of Bill's reach. After a quick look at the ground, he said grudgingly, "All right, I see."

"Notice anything queer?" Bill asked, looking up at him.

"No." Vance was eyeing him with suspicion, warily.

"How about you, Sheriff?"

"Well . . ." Holly hesitated briefly, then went on, "The fact is, this afternoon I noticed that some of the prints are clearer than the others. And further back they don't make a straight line."

Bill smiled thinly, nodding, "But why?"

The lawman shrugged. "I don't know."

Without their noticing it, Virginia had come over and was standing over Bill now. "Why, Bill?" she asked.

He came erect, saying, "Come along and I'll show you." And he led the way over toward Horse.

Bill stopped at the fire long enough to pick up a branch blazing at one end. Then he kept straight on until he had walked in behind the buckskin. There he held the branch low to the ground, looking back over his shoulder at the sheriff as he drawled, "See if this means anything."

Holly and Virginia, with Vance closely following them, came up to him. The lawman looked deliberately at the ground, at length saying, "Nothing I can see. They're tracks sure. But different ones. Made by Ted's horse there."

BILL nodded readily enough. "So they are. But let's follow 'em back a ways." And he led the way around the alder thicket along the line of the buckskin's tracks, holding the blazing end of the branch low to the ground.

After several more steps Bill stopped abruptly. He glanced around at the sheriff, asking enigmatically, "See what I mean?"

Vance was quick to leave the lawman's side and step around Bill to inspect the ground, asking, "What?"

Bill pointed groundward. "There where your horse missed his stride."

"What're you trying to prove?" Vance asked irritably. "Does it mean anything if my horse missed his stride?"

Bill soberly tilted his head. "I'm afraid it does," he said quietly. "No horse but yours, walkin' straight and free across open ground, would step out to the side like this."

Vance was scowling at him, obviously trying to see what lay behind his words. "What's wrong with my horse?" he asked.

"Maybe I put it the wrong way, Vance," Bill drawled. "Maybe I should've said that any horse you ride is thrown off stride."

He glanced briefly at the sheriff now to see a look of wonder gathering on the lawman's face. Then Holly was saying softly, feelingly, "They're the same!"

Bill faced Theodore Vance squarely now. "It was you, Vance. You must've been up here to see Pat Rush after he gave Horse his marchin' orders yesterday. That probably surprised you, to think that Crow Track had backed down from kickin' a homesteader off their grass. It gave you

an idea. Today you started working at your idea by filin' on the quarter-section alongside this, by having Virginia file on her piece."

When he paued, Vance's glance shot helplessly toward the sheriff and on to the others. Then the man seemed to find his nerve again, for he laughed mirthlessly, saying, "You're not talking sense, Wells! Of course I filed on this land. The law says I can."

"That's what I've been saying," Bill agreed, too readily to suit Vance. "But do these other people know that you paid two or three saddle bums to file on land adjoining yours? That you aim to have their grass to throw in with yours. That maybe you'll buy Virginia's quarter-section, too? Do they know that last night you rode out to Crow Track, stole Horse's mare, rode her in here and shot Pat Rush?"

Vance was smiling crookedly now in a brazen attempt to appear unconcerned. Yet his paleness betrayed him, that and the tremor in his tone as he said, "Go on, make a good story of it, Wells!"

"Guess I will at that," Bill drawled. "Only I'll leave it to Pat's sister and the sheriff." He ganced at Virginia. "Virg, would you swear out a warrant for the man who killed Pat?"

"You know I would, Bill. Gladly."

"And you, Sheriff," Bill went on, his look shifting to the lawman. "Did you ever notice how Vance sits his hull?"

Holly nodded.

Bill's eyes swung quickly back to Vance. "You're done for, neighbor," he said. "Virginia's swearing out a warrant on you. Holly's had his look at those tracks and he'll testify against you. And there won't be a man on the jury that doesn't know enough about horses to figure the same as Holly and I do. Which is that you rode that Crow Track mare in here last night and bushwhacked Pat."

Vance suddenly took a backward step, arcing up the Colt.

He was about to say something when Bill drawled. "It's a shame you busted that hammer when you hit Horse."

Theodore Vance's glance dropped involuntarily to his weapon. A split-second later Bill lunged in on him. Vance saw his mistake and tried to dodge. His thumb drew back the hammer of the .45 and he was swinging it frantically into line as Bill's lifting blow caught him.

Bill stepped in and kicked the Colt from his hand. Then he heard a soft cry and turned to find Virginia there beside him.

As he took her in his arms, he looked beyond to the sheriff, asking, "Now how do you reckon he figured he really could have busted that hammer?"

THE END

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CHAPTER ONE

Bullwhip Brigade

WES STEVENS stood on the rim of the valley and looked down at the town he took to be Tokonka. Sweat plastered his shirt to his back, and his feet were numb clubs stuffed into his sharp-toed boots. He had walked a long way, and Wes Stevens didn't like to walk. No horseman ever does.

But he didn't think about that now; he was looking at the town. A dozen frame buildings made the one-sided street. They weren't any different from a hundred other buildings in a hundred other towns. But there was something else.

Behind the town a thicket of tall derricks sloped up. Here and there white steam spurted up, and smoke would ascend and swirl in the heat. Wes heard the steady, monotonous thudding of the long beams reaching out from the derricks . . . lifting, falling. He had never seen an oil well, but he knew that was what they were.

There were a few houses and dugouts behind the town, but not many. Mostly there were dirty white tents. An endless chain of wagons crawled down from the slope, passed in front of the town, and disappeared along a red dusty road to the north. There was the bellowing of the drivers, and the hard, flat cracks of bullwhips as the wagons filed in front of the buildings.

Wes grunted, mopped his face on the sleeve of his shirt and started walking. "Bullwhips."

He came down to the crowded plank walk that ran in front of the buildings. Here and there wooden awnings jutted out from the store fronts. Blanketed Indians sat in their shade and stared blankly at nothing. There seemed to be more

Two men loitered near the pipeline, fondling rifles.

saloons than in most towns, and they seemed to be louder. Wes picked his way through the Indians and the usual drunks, stopped in front of a small building squeezed in between a saloon and a saddle shop and looked at the sign on the window. He took a sweat-soaked letter out of his shirt pocket. In one corner of the envelope, in small, neat type, were the words, "Territory Oil Transportation Company." The words on the sign were the same. At the bottom of the sign, in small letters, was, S. W. PRUITT, PRESIDENT.

It was cooler inside, anyway it was in the shade. There was a high plank desk that reached most of the way across the office. A young man leaned his elbows on the desk and watched Wes as he came in.

When Wes got to the desk he took the letter out again, showed it to the young man and said, "I'm Wes Stevens. I'm on a job for Mr. Pruitt. I'd like to see him if he's in."

The young man frowned and pushed the envelope around on the desk with a long, delicate finger, as though he wanted to see what was in it but he didn't want to contaminate himself. The young man didn't fit in with the rest of the town. He looked like he'd fit in better where they went in for balancing tea cups. For one thing, he wore a coat—in this weather. It wasn't a heavy one, but still a coat. His face was thin and pale. Wes guessed that his eyes were blue, but they really didn't have enough color to tell for sure. When he got tired of pushing the envelope around he started brushing dust from his coat. He didn't like to have dust on his coat.

Finally, he nodded his head, very slightly, very slowly. "Stevens Detective Agency," he said, looking at the letter. "I'm sorry. We don't need a detective. Now now."

His voice fit in with the rest of him. Wes decided that he didn't care much for the young man. Or his voice. The part about not having a job, he didn't care for that at all.

Wes leaned on the desk and tried to keep his voice down. "Look, partner," he said, "I got a letter addressed to my office in Fort Worth, to Wes Stevens. I'm Wes Stevens. The letter says S. W. Pruitt wants me for a job here in Tokonka. So I'm here. I had a horse, he was a good horse. I called him Patch on account of he was a little black and dun paint, and somebody shot him out from under me. Bushwhacked me about five miles back from a hilltop with a long range gun. I had to walk a long way. I don't like to walk, but I did it, and I'm here just like the letter said for me to be."

He wasn't through, he was just beginning to get wound up. Then a voice behind him said, "Oh . . . I'm sorry."

WES turned. She must have come into the office while he had been talking. Her face had the delicacy of the young man's. The delicacy, but not the weakness. It was a pretty face, and a businesslike face. Wes liked pretty, businesslike faces.

She made a quick, easy movement and removed a small bonnet. She had a small mouth, a sensitive but not a weak mouth. It said again, "I'm sorry. About your horse." Her eyes said she really meant it.

She moved easily behind the desk. By just doing that, she was the boss. The young man felt that as much as Wes did. He got a black, flat-crowned hat from a rack, placed it at an exact angle on his blond head and made for the door without looking back. At the door he started coughing, a long, dry cough. He snatched a white handkerchief from his breast pocket and pressed it to his mouth. He was still coughing when he disappeared through the door.

"I'm Nora Pruitt," the girl said. She motioned to a chair and Wes took it. "Samuel Pruitt was my father. The man you talked to first is Lyle, my brother."

Wes nodded. "I'd be obliged," he said, "if you could tell me where I'd find your father. I—"

There was something in her eyes that stopped him. "I'm afraid Lyle was right," she said softly. "We won't need you, after all. It's too late now. My father is dead."

Wes said, "Oh." He tried to think of something else to say. He couldn't think of anything.

She had said it quietly and without

emotion. Her voice told Wes nothing. Only the look in her eyes could tell him what she felt.

"There was a check for a hundred dollars that came as a retainer with the letter," Wes said. "I feel like you have something coming for that."

She shook her head. "It's no use now. Father borrowed the money back east to lay a pipeline from this Tokonka field to a railroad about twenty miles north of here. If the pipeline had gone through he could have transported the oil for about a third of the price the rednecks are charging."

"Rednecks?"

"The teamsters." There was a bitterness in her voice that Wes hadn't heard before. "First they pulled up sections of the line, and then they wrecked one of our pump stations. Father had heard about you. You'd helped cattlemen with ruffians like that. He thought you could protect the line, the same way you protect cattle from rustlers. It's too late now," she said again. "They—they killed him."

Her voice dropped. Her face dropped, too, and her eyes went to her hands folded in her lap. For the first time, there was a look of defeat in her eyes. "The pipeline crew protected the line as well as they could."

Wes didn't hear the rest of it. He didn't ask who *they* were. Bullwhips, and shooting horses, and murder—as far as Wes was concerned, they all went together.

At last he said, "These teamsters. Do they have a boss?"

Wes saw she had thought about that before. She thought about it some more before she spoke.

"Yes," she said, "but he couldn't have had anything to do with it. Luke Sawyer, he was one of father's best friends. He owns over fifty wagons, but he knew that pipelines were bound to come, sooner or later. When it happened he planned to keep the wagons, but to haul drilling tools and derrick riggings."

"I see," Wes said. He didn't see yet, but he had to say something. "There's just one more thing, Miss Pruitt. How was your father killed?"

It wasn't an easy question to ask, and it wasn't an easy one for her to answer. But she did it. She looked up at him in that direct way she had and said, "He was killed by a rifle while he was out at one of the pump stations. It was a high-powered rifle, fired from a long way off."

A high-powered rifle. Wes thought of a long range gun firing from a hilltop. And he thought of a pony, a little black and dun with two saddle-gun bullets in him. He said, "Thank you, Miss Pruitt. Thank you very much."

CHAPTER TWO

Hole in His Head

THE sun was still hot outside. The wagons rolled by endlessly. Wes stood for an instant in the doorway of the office. Before he stepped outside, he turned and said, "I may have to have a horse."

Nora Pruitt said,"Please take mine. He's a little buckskin in the stable down at the end of the street. I'll tell the liveryman."

"Thank you," Wes said again. He couldn't think of anything else so he stepped outside.

He didn't know what to do next, but if you're looking for trouble a saloon is a good place to start. He pushed through the batwings of the one next door and went in.

Customers crowded four deep at the two long bars yelling for drinks. Bartenders worked shoulder to shoulder without moving out of their tracks or looking up. Their pouring arms went up and down, with the same monotonous motion of the walking beams on the derricks.

Wes pushed enough drunks out of the way to get to the back where the games were. There were six stud tables, and a table where a fish-eyed man was dealing faro in his sleep. Everything was crowded. Most of the men were oil field workers in greasy overalls and heavy brogan shoes. Most of these men didn't wear guns. The men who did wear guns made up for it by wearing two. There was nobody that Wes knew. He pushed some more drunks out of the way and headed back for the doors.

The next saloon he almost missed. There was a sign above the swinging doors that said it was a saloon, but there

wasn't enough noise coming from it to make it real. Wes tried the doors to make sure.

Even then he wasn't sure. When the doors clacked shut behind him the town was gone. There was a dark mahogany bar against one wall, not too big. A half a dozen oil lamps flickered in fluted glass chandeliers. It was the kind of place that needed lamps in the daytime. There were three card tables in the back, two of them were empty, and four or five men around a roulette table.

There weren't twenty people in the place, including the five girls scattered along the bar trying to keep their dead faces from getting deader. Wes wondered about that. What was it that would keep people out of a classy place like this?

His boots clacked on the polished floor as he walked over to the end of the bar. He leaned on it and said, "Whiskey."

The bartender looked at him with eyes like two raisins sticking in a blob of dough. He reached under the bar, got a bottle, set a glass down and poured.

Wes flipped a silver dollar on the bar and turned the glass up. It was good whiskey, very good.

The bartender didn't touch the silver. he didn't even look at it, He said, "That'll be five dollars." His mouth didn't move.

Wes knew then why there weren't more people in the saloon.

He fished four more silver dollars out of his pocket and slid them across the bar and looked around. There were five men lined up at the bar. Wes didn't know any of them. There was one oil field worker alone. He didn't know him either. Wes finished his drink and walked to the back of the place.

The men at the roulette table watched the little ball go round and round. The blue chips in the center of the table would add up to three years of any kind of honest work. Nobody seemed to care.

The poker table was different. There were just as many blue chips in the middle of the table, but there were three tight faces around it that said they cared. They cared plenty. There was one more face in the four-handed game. It didn't say anything. It was a pale face with eyes that had no color at all as far as Wes could see. The last time Wes had seen the face it had been looking at him over the top of a high desk. It belonged to Lyle Pruitt.

The face across the table from Pruitt had apple cheeks and a small pink mouth under a button nose. He looked like the kind of man who would laugh a lot. He wasn't laughing now. He sat uncomfortably in the chair like a fat sausage bent in the middle and stared at his cards with a pair of watery eyes. He wasn't too happy about what he saw.

He worried about it quite a while. Finally he pushed his stack to the center of the table and said, "Your luck can't last forever, Lyle. I'll see you and raise you five hundred."

The other two faces said they quit. They pushed their chairs back and got up to show they meant it.

Lyle Pruitt counted the chips very carefully and put them in the middle. The apple-cheeked man fanned his cards out in his pudgy hands. Some were red, some were black. They ran king, queen, jack, ten, nine. "A straight," he said. "King high."

Pruitt's cards were down now, very neatly—very red. He said, "A flush in hearts." His delicate white hands went out and pulled the chips close to his chest. "That's a tough break, Luke."

THE pink-cheeked man looked sad. Lyle raked the chips into his coat pocket, revealing the tiny, hooked butt of a derringer clipped under his left arm. Then he snatched at his handkerchief and pressed it to his mouth. He bent over the table, his thin body jerking convulsively in a long, jarring, racking cough. When it was over he breathed hard, his pale face flushed. He wiped his mouth with the handkerchief. It was covered with tiny, brilliant little flecks of crimson. He left the table without a word and went over to the bar.

Wes said, "Mr. Sawyer."

The apple cheeks looked up, nodded sadly.

"My name is Wes Stevens. I was supposed to have gone to work for S. W. Pruitt. He was killed before I got here. I wonder if you could tell me something about him."

"Oh, the pipeline?" The watery eyes

were careful eyes now—very, very careful.

Wes nodded. After a while Sawyer motioned to a chair and Wes sat down and waited.

"He was a big man," Sawyer said at last. "Big voice, big fists, big heart. He used them all. His crew loved him. A lot of men hated him. He was that kind of man."

He seemed to think about that. "I like that kind of man," he said. "Some people have an idea I killed him because he was taking my business." He didn't bother to deny it.

"That was Lyle Pruitt's father," Wes said.

Luke Sawyer drummed the table nervously with pudgy fingers. "He wasn't anything like Lyle. Sam was a man. He made his money by working."

"And Lyle by gambling?"

Sawyer didn't answer. The drumming stopped, all meaning went out of his eyes. His face was blank. He got heavily to his feet. "I'm glad to have met you, Mr. Stevens. I've got some work . . . I've . . ." The rest of the words died before they were born. He tried a smile that didn't come off so well, turned and thudded back to a small door marked PRIVATE. He opened it and went in.

Wes sat for a minute at the table and thought. What he knew didn't add up to anything. He got up and walked slowly past the bar for the front doors. A dry-faced man leaned against the bar and stared at him from under the brim of a new black hat. The oil field worker was still at the end of the bar. He seemed to be mildly interested in some spot about the middle of Lyle Pruitt's face.

Outside, Wes took another look at the sign above the doors. Some foot-high letters were arranged to spell SALOON. Below that were some more letters. *Luke Sawyer, Prop.*

Wes stood for a minute on the plank walk, dodged drunks and wondered about Luke Sawyer. What with wagons and saloons, Luke seemed to be doing all right for himself. Wes added that to the rest of the things he knew. The total was still nothing. He shrugged, hitched his .45s and decided to take a look at the rest of the saloons.

He found nothing in them. When he got back to the pipeline office the sun was still high. Nora Pruitt was still in the office, talking to a steady-eyed, sun-browned man wearing the khakis and brogans of the oil field wroker. He was the one Wes had seen in Sawyer's Saloon. And there was something in Nora's eyes that made it a very special kind of talk.

There was something about the way she looked at him that Wes didn't like. That was crazy. He told himself so. He still didn't like it.

"Miss Pruitt," Wes said, "if the offer is still open, I'm going to take your horse. I thought I'd look around some while the sun's still up."

"Of course," she said. "The liveryman knows about you." She looked at the other man again. This time Wes knew that it wasn't the man that he didn't like. He wouldn't like for her to look at any man that way. That was crazy too. Nora said, "Mr. Stevens, this is Jeff Truman, foreman of the line crew. I've been telling him about you."

They shook hands. Jeff Truman's hands were hard and rough. Ordinarily, Wes liked hard, rough hands.

"If you'd tell me where this pump station is," Wes said, "I'd like to see it. I don't have anything to go on. It may give me an idea."

"I'll go with you," Jeff said. "I was going out there anyway."

Wes would rather have gone alone. He said, "Thanks. That will be fine."

Truman got a rifle from under the desk. Nora's eyes were telling him to be careful. This time Wes didn't think about the way she looked. He was staring at the rifle. It was a Winchester .30-30 with an extra long 27-inch barrel. There are a lot of Winchester .30-30s. There are not many with that extra long barrel. A gun like that, with a telescope sight on it, could shoot a long way. Wes wanted a closer look at the gun, a lot closer. He didn't get it. Jeff tucked the rifle under his arm, flashed a brief smile at Nora and headed for the door.

AT THE livery stable, Wes gave his name to an ancient little bandy-legged man who listened carefully, spurted tobacco juice through a fierce, brown-stained mustache, turned and rolled back

toward the stalls without a word. When he came back he was leading a black and a sturdy little buckskin. Both were saddled.

The buckskin was a good horse. Good legs, big chest. Wes took the reins and slapped the horse's neck in the way that both horses and horsemen like. Then he swung up and followed Truman out into the street, up toward the thumping, snorting derricks.

A heavy, acrid smell of gasses hung over the slope where the derricks were. There was the monotonous rising and falling of the giant walking beams as they lifted their two-ton drilling tools and let them drop. Wes and Truman skirted the edge of the slope and headed up to where the great wooden field tanks were standing. Past the field tanks to where there was a steam engine housed in a wooden box shed. Two men in khaki sat on piles of wood by the boiler, holding rifles in their laps.

"This is our first pump station," Jeff said. "It moves the oil up to the top of the slope. The next five miles is mostly down hill or flat, so we don't need another pump until we get to Indian Hill about five miles from here. That's where the old man was killed."

They followed the bulging scar in the red earth that covered the pipeline. About every half mile two men loitered near the pipeline, fondling rifles, watching. Here and there the bulge would be broken and sections of big-mouthed pipe would be ripped from its bed. Jeff muttered one word:

"Rednecks."

They rode on in silence.

At last they slipped into a shallow, mud-crusted creek. They started up the other side, through a cluster of rattling dry willows.

"The pump is just across the creek," Jeff said. "Near the bottom of that hill."

They broke through the willows and Jeff was pointing at a hill in front of them that had two slim rocks spearing up from its top like feathers. Suddenly a rifle roared.

A lead slug whined. Close. Too close. Wes was already off the buckskin. He jumped and kicked the horse hard and he skittered away. He didn't like to kick him, but he didn't want another horse killed, not one he was riding.

The rifle roared again. More lead whined and slashed through the dry willows. Jeff was on the ground with his rifle. Wes had his guns out but he couldn't see anything. They crouched in the willows and stared. Stared hard.

Then they saw it. There was a bend in the creek about fifty yards away, and a clump of willows like their own. The rifle poked through the dry leaves. It roared again.

WES was on his knees. It wasn't a good way to shoot. His guns crashed twice in each hand anyway. Jeff blasted once with the long Winchester. The rifle around the bend jerked up suddenly, straight up. Then it disappeared. They could hear it as it rattled on the dried mud and they knew what that meant. They kept their guns out and followed the creek bed around to make sure.

Their first guess had been right. It was the dry-faced man in the new hat that Wes had seen in the saloon. His hat wasn't any good now, it had a hole in it. So did his head. His eyes were wide, his mouth was wide, he was staring straight into the blazing sun. It didn't bother him at all.

Wes hadn't expected to hit anything firing from his knees at that distance. He hadn't. One shot from that long Winchester had done it.

"Good shooting," Wes said. "Very good."

"I've got a good gun," Jeff said. "At that distance I couldn't miss." He leaned his rifle against a willow, knelt beside the dead man and began to go through his pockets.

Wes picked up the dead man's rifle. A carbine, short barrel. With the right man on it it would be good up to two or three hundred yards. The dry-faced man hadn't been the right one—anyway, the gun wouldn't be any good at long range, even with a telescope sight. Wes put the gun down and said, "Do you know him?"

"I've seen him, he's nobody special. The town is full of them. They hire their guns out to anybody that wants to buy."

Anybody that wants to buy. Wes picked up Truman's Winchester. He didn't ask

if he could. He was tired of asking questions. He was tired of getting shot at from ambush with saddle guns.

The rifle was almost new. There wasn't a scratch on it except some very faint ones just behind the rear sight. Polish had almost covered them up. He wiped his sleeve along the barrel. Some more scratches came out, same as the others, almost half way down the barrel. Jeff truman stood up and took the rifle when Wes handed it to him. His face told Wes nothing.

"Nothing on him," Jeff said. He cradled his rifle and they started back to get their horses. "He could be anybody. I don't think he's the one that killed the old man, not with that carbine."

Wes didn't think so either. He said, "You'd better go back to town and tell somebody about our friend here, if anybody's interested. I'm going to look around some. I won't be long."

Jeff Truman nodded. He slipped the Winchester in the saddle holster, swung on the black, and Wes watched them as they slipped down into the creek, up again on the other side and head toward town. He thought for a while and got nowhere. He called the buckskin over, got on him and rode toward Indian Hill.

CHAPTER THREE

Death's Dusty Sign

WES pulled the buckskin in between the two slim rocks that looked like feathers at a distance, and stared down at the pump station. It was beautiful. Beautiful for a bushwhacker with the right kind of gun. He could wait behind the two feather rocks without being seen, kill his man and slip away behind the hill into a thicket along the creek banks and head to town. It was almost too beautiful.

Wes got down from his horse, down on his hands and knees and scratched in the gravel at the base of one of the rocks. He hadn't expected to find anything, and he wasn't disappointed. He didn't. He stopped his scratching, wondered why he had come here in the first place and started to climb back in the saddle. Then he saw the flash. The sun, sliding away to the west, caught it between the feather rocks and spat sudden fire. Down on his hands and knees again, scratching. And then he found it. A tiny, wedge-shaped piece of glass.

Wes looked at it, felt of it and bounced it in the palm of his hand. Glass. It could be anything. It could even be a piece of an old Indian trinket. It could be, but Wes didn't think it was. He wrapped it carefully in a dirty handkerchief and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. Then he got on the buckskin and headed toward town. The sun was beginning to lose its grip on the sky and was slithering reluctantly toward the horizon.

By the time Wes reached town, the sun was gone. Big gas torches around the derricks beat against the sky and covered the town with a bloody haze. Orange lamplight from the saloons flickered and tossed on the noise of whoops and yells. A boomtown at night.

He turned the buckskin over to the bandy-legged little liveryman, watched him go to work with the brushes, and tried to decide what to do next. He was sure about one thing. He wasn't going to be bushwhacked any more if he could help it. Twice in one day was enough. It was too much.

The black hat with the carbine was nothing, just a gun. He was sure of that, too. That was all he was sure of. Sawyer could have hired him, or Jeff Truman—both had been in the saloon. Maybe Sawyer didn't want to give up hauling oil, after all, or maybe Truman hankered for a pipeline of his own along with the boss' daughter. If Lyle Pruitt was the kind to shoot his own old man, he could have done it. But Wes decided family ties would mean a lot to a man like Lyle.

And there was that Winchester of Truman's. The scratches on it could have been caused by a lot of things. Loose rivets in the saddle holster could have done it. The clamps of a telescope sight could have done it too.

When he got through thinking, he still didn't know what would be the best thing to do. You never know that until it's done. Wes gave the buckskin a friendly slap on the neck and walked outside.

The plank walk was crowded. The saloons were more crowded. Bullwhips

whistled and cracked in the darkness as the black shapes of wagons crawled through the street. Wes stopped long enough in the pipeline office to find out from Nora that Jeff Truman hadn't come in yet, then he pushed his way toward Sawyer's saloon.

When he got there, he started to push on the swinging doors, then changed his mind. If Luke was hiding anything he wouldn't be keeping it in the bar. He turned away from the doors, walked down to the end of the block and came up behind the buildings. Dirty white tents huddled like weary ghosts. Red light from the derrick torches splashed on the backs of the buildings. Nobody else was back there.

He found the window to Sawyer's office and tried it. It was locked. Wes took off his hat, put his hand in it and pushed it through the glass. From the noise they were making in the saloon, they couldn't have heard him if he had used an ax. He unlatched the window, raised it and climbed in.

THERE was a bulky bundle on the floor beneath the window. Wes stepped over that, into the office. There was a roll-top desk, two chairs, a calendar on the wall, and that was all. He tried the desk drawers and found nothing. He tried the roll-top. Locked. He pulled on it. Hard. It snapped and came open.

Books. Big, thick, board-bound books for keeping business accounts. Wes took one of the chairs, pushed the back under the knob of the door. He went back, opened the book and looked.

He looked a long time, thumbing the pages slowly. It was the saloon's book, but it wasn't Sawyer's. Page by page Sawyer's part in the saloon got smaller and smaller, and a name kept appearing on the other side more and more. *Lyle Pruitt.* Below the entry would be another word. *Poker.* By the middle of the book Sawyer owned none of the saloon and few of the wagons. Wes didn't have to finish the book to know how the story would end.

He closed the book and put it away. He had found out something. He didn't know how it fit in, but he intended to. He pulled the roll-top down and made for the window opening on the rear.

He'd forgotten about the bundle on the floor. The red light of the gas torches slanted over it; it lay in the shadows next to the wall. It was a long bundle, as long as a man. Wes got down on his knees, struck a match and cupped it in his hands. It *was* a man.

He lay with his face to the wall with that rigidlike limpness that can mean only one thing. Wes didn't have to turn him over to know it was Jeff Truman. He didn't have to feel for the pulse in his throat to know he was dead.

There were two black holes, big and very close together, in the front of his shirt. The shirt was stiff with blood not quite dry.

Wes took his handkerchief and spread it over the dead face. He couldn't think of anything else. He knelt there for what seemed a long time and stared out the window at the leaping gas torches. He thought for a long time, and the only thing he could think of was, *Why? Why?*

There wasn't any answer. Not yet. He got up, went to the door and took the chair away. Then he opened the door and stepped into the saloon.

The place was crowded now. At five dollars a drink, they stood three or four deep at the bar. Sawyer was standing at the end of the bar all by himself. He had a bottle all to himself, and he was fiddling nervously with a whiskey glass. Wes pushed his way through the crowd, shook off one of the bar girls and stepped up beside him.

Sawyer's head jerked up. His cheeks were even redder than they had been that afternoon. Half the bottle was gone.

"I owe you for a window," Wes said. "I had to break one to get in your office."

It took a while for Sawyer to get it. When he did, his pink mouth dropped open and his head began to wobble on his shoulders.

"I had a look at your books," Wes said. "I also had a look at Jeff Truman."

Whiskey spilled over Sawyer's chin. His mouth started working. His watery eyes said a thousand things, but all his mouth could say was, "I didn't do it, I didn't do it," over and over.

Wes pushed the bottle away and said, "Lay off that stuff and listen to me. Is

there a federal marshal in this town?"

Sawed bobbed his head uncertainly. "Deputy."

"Where do the Pruitt's live?"

The head was bobbing eagerly now. "Central Hotel."

"Find the deputy and bring him there. Have you got that?"

The head kept bobbing. It was bobbing when Wes turned and pushed his way out the door.

He stopped in front of the pipeline office only long enough to make sure that both Nora and Lyle were in there. Down the plank walk was a big, false-fronted building. A sign said CENTRAL HOTEL. He went in.

"Lyle Pruitt still in two-twelve?"

A bored, droopy-eyed desk clerk looked up and sneered. "He ain't never been in two-twelve. He's in two-o-five where he's always been, across the hall from Miss Nora. He ain't in."

Wes took out two silver dollars and slid them across the desk. "Maybe he came in and you didn't see him."

The desk clerk looked at the two pieces of silver and sneered again. He picked them up and put them in his pocket. "Maybe."

AN OIL lamp flickered weakly at the top of the stairs, but there was enough light for Wes to see the numbers on the doors. He hesitated a minute and listened. Nothing. He looked at Lyle's door, two-o-five, then for no reason that he could think of, he took out his knife and went to work on two-o-six across the hall.

He forced the knife blade into the crack of the door, pushed up on the latch lock and he was in. He shut the door, lit a lamp on the dresser and wondered why he had gone to this trouble. He started pulling out drawers and opening closets, still wondering. There was nothing in Nora Pruitt's room that shouldn't be there. He thought about that and thumbed a family album that lay on the dresser. He looked at one page of photographs with names and dates written below them. He muttered. At a time like this, he looked at family albums. He turned the page, then another.

Mostly they were pictures of Nora, her father and mother. In the middle of the book was a wedding picture. The groom was Nora's father. The bride was a new one. She was beautiful, in a pale, delicate sort of way. Beside the big, bullish Sam Pruitt, she looked even more delicate. Wes tried to remember where he had seen a face like hers. He turned the page and found out.

It was a picture of Lyle Pruitt, but the writing beneath it said, *Lyle Wayland.* The next page was another picture of the pale bride. The writing said, *Elisabeth Wayland Pruitt, Indian Territory, two months before her death.*

Wes snapped the book shut and said out loud, "Why." Then he blew out the lamp and left the room.

His knife opened the door to two-o-five. He shut the door, lit the lamp and started through the closet. There was a row of suits, very neat, and that was all. Wes grunted. Absently, he fluttered his hand along the row of limp-looking sleeves. He grunted again. The sleeves weren't as limp as they looked. When he turned the cuffs back he found out why. Tiny, spring-wire clamps were sewn into the lining about four inches up from the cuffs. Some gamblers whose fingers weren't supple enough to deal the cards they wanted used gadgets like that. Wes fingered the wires for a minute, then turned the cuffs down. Anyway, he knew where Lyle's gambling luck came from.

He tried the drawers next. Nothing in them that could be interesting. There was a small silver box on the dresser. He opened that. Cuff links, stick pins, collar buttons—and a little package no bigger than a half-dollar, stamped, tied with twine, and addressed: *Ralson Arms Company, St. Louis, Mo.*

He didn't open it. He didn't think he would have to know what was in it. There were steps in the hall. They came down to the door and stopped. That would be Luke Sawyer and the deputy. Wes didn't bother to turn around. He said, "come in," and the door opened.

It wasn't Luke Sawyer.

Wes saw the two ugly, short-snouted barrels of a derringer in the dresser mirror. He saw a pale, thin, immaculate face and two colorless eyes above the gun—the double-barreled little gun that had blown two holes so close together in Jeff

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Truman. Lyle Pruitt closed the door with his foot and said, "The desk clerk told me I had company. Turn around."

Wes turned around, slowly, his hands away from his guns, just the way Lyle would want him to.

The little derringer didn't shake. Not so much as a mountain on a still day. Lyle said, "Would you like to tell me why you're in my room?"

Wes thought of trying to talk his way out. The derringer didn't look like it would listen to that kind of talk. He said, "I was trying to find out why you killed old Sam Pruitt, and Jeff Truman, and had two trys at me."

The colorless eyes made no comment. The thin mouth moved. "Did you find out?"

"I think so. You took a shot at me with Truman's rifle because you didn't want any questions asked. You missed me because there was a little piece of lens broken out of your telescope sights. I found a little piece of glass on top of Indian Hill where you bushwhacked the old man. I think it's a piece of this." Wes bounced the small package in the palm of his hand. "You were going to send this lens to St. Louis and have it reproduced. Is there somebody else you plan to bushwhack?"

WES knew that he wasn't fooling anybody. Lyle knew he was playing for time, but he didn't seem to care. He said in that soft, smooth voice of his, "You never know."

Wes bounced the little package for a while. Then: "Why did you do it?"

"You like to talk. You like to stick your nose in other people's business. You tell me." No waver from the derringer.

"If I had stuck my nose in a little farther and asked some questions I'd know more. As it is, I can only make guesses from what I've seen of a family album and a piece of glass."

The colorless eyes waited. They could wait forever.

Wes said, "I think you must have loved your mother a great deal." A twitch from the thin mouth. "Old man Pruitt wasn't your father at all. I could have found that out by asking somebody,

but sometimes I do things the hard way. You never liked him. You hated him. You thought he caused your mother's death when he brought her to Indian Territory. That's the guess I'd make from looking at an album. You hated him enough to kill him."

Lyle Pruitt waited. Suddenly he snatched his handkerchief from his breast pocket, pressed it to his mouth and coughed a long, racking cough. His derringer never wavered. He panted hard, wiped his mouth and put the blood-flecked handkerchief back in his pocket.

"What else do you guess?" he said softly.

"You're a sick man, the same way your mother was sick. Maybe you're sick another way, too. I don't know about that. I guess everybody goes a little crazy when they start killing. You weren't satisfied with killing the old man, you wanted to ruin the whole family. You went to work on Sawyer and got control of the wagons so you could force him to put his rednecks to tearing up the pipeline. I broke into Sawyer's office and saw his books—and Jeff Truman.

"Did Jeff come in the office while you were working on the books? Was he getting too curious about where his rifle had been at the time the old man was killed? Were you going to make Sawyer get rid of the body for you?"

No sound from the pale face.

Wes looked for a minute at the small package he was bouncing in his hand. He was careful not to get his hands too close to his guns. He wondered about the drunken Sawyer. He decided that he couldn't expect any help from him. The pale face was still waiting.

"You made some mistakes," Wes said finally. "I make mistakes. We all make mistakes. For one thing, you didn't get all the dust off your coat after you rode back from trying to bushwhack me. You're not the kind that would ordinarily have dust on your coat. I didn't think of that right away. Sometimes I'm slow. Wes tried to think of something else to say, something to kill time. He couldn't think of anything else. He bounced the small package. The derringer looked impatient.

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It was now or never. He saw that. He saw the delicate finger stiffen, tightening on the tiny trigger. Now or never. Suddenly he bounched the little package hard in his hand. It flew out of his hand toward the pale face.

CHAPTER FOUR

Better Than a Noose

THE package struck the pale cheek and glanced off. The derringer wavered, just a little. Not enough. Wes shot his hands down for his guns, and even as he did it he knew he didn't have a chance. Before he cleared his guns the brutish derringer had settled back on him. Not a chance.

He pulled fast, guns up, hammers back. But not fast enough to beat a flick of a finger that would blow him to hell. He saw that. Even as his guns flashed up he knew he couldn't stop that finger.

There was a roar, another roar in the small room. The finger didn't twitch. Wes knew he hadn't missed, at that distance he couldn't possibly have missed. The thin body jerked once, twice. The derringer clattered on the floor. The colorless eyes still said nothing. The thin mouth twitched once. The pale face suddenly skidded away like a picture falling from a wall and there was a muffled thud as he fell. He lay still.

Wes didn't do anything. He was still standing there with his guns in his hands when the desk clerk crashed into the room. Wes said, "You better see if you can find the federal marshal. There's a deputy around somewhere. And Luke Sawyer."

Then he put his guns up and sat on the bed and waited. He looked at the frail body on the floor and wondered what kind of twisted thoughts had gone on inside that blond head. He wondered why he hadn't squeezed the trigger. It would have been so easy. Just squeeze the trigger.

But some men know when they are through. Maybe Lyle Pruitt had known that. Maybe that was what Lyle had wanted. It could be that Wes had even done him a favor by ending it fast. It

was better than a hangman's noose. It was faster and cleaner, but no more certain than the bloody, racking cough.

There was the hurried sound of boots in the hallway. It would be the marshal this time. Wes didn't move. There was nothing to run from. Sawyer could tell his story now and there would be nothing to it. Three men killed—and a little black and dun pony. Nothing to it. . . .

Tokonka—thumping derricks, shimmering white tents, the endless chain of wagons and the bullwhips. Wes pulled the little buckskin up at the top of the slope and looked down at it. It looked just the same as it had the first time he had seen it. The buckskin switched his head and Wes bent over in the saddle and patted his neck. He was a good horse. Wes liked him. He liked the horse almost as much as he liked the girl who had given it to him.

He wouldn't let himself think about Nora. Not now. But a range detective gets to a lot of places. Some day . . . Wes patted the buckskin's neck again, pulled him around and headed south, back in the direction of Fort Worth. A range detective never knows where he's going to be the next year—or the next day. . . .

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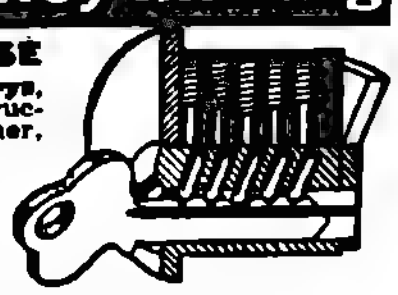

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(Continued from page 59)

Mike turned his face to the wall, feeling the pain flood his chest and leg where the doctor had probed for the bullet. Mike had lain there, a bullet clenched between his strong white teeth. He'd borne that pain well, but this other pain was too much.

"Wait, Buck! Did Hal ride over to the X-Bar? With the presents for the buttons?"

"He did, boss. I put 'em in his saddlebags myself."

"An' that excuse the doc wrote for me?"

"That's with 'em."

"Get now!"

The door closed. Mike let his eyes open to stare at the blank wall. He'd never before noticed how cold an unpainted wall could be. "Like me," he told it. "Like my life."

He reflected. The excuse would be all that was needed. He'd made it cold and unfeeling. A woman like Millie would savvy his drift. There wouldn't be any more invitations.

He didn't hear the door open. When the bed creaked, he rolled his head, mouth framing profanity.

"Mike! Oh, Mike!"

She sat down, her blue eyes shiny.

"Millie! You didn't get my letter?"

She nodded, reaching hands toward his face, gently touching his brown cheeks. She whispered, "And the presents were lovely. Danny and Peggy love them. But —they don't realize the best gift of all, Mike."

He stared blankly.

She laughed over a sob. "You gave them freedom, Mike. You made Horizon safe for them—for the Proutys and the Baxters. But mostly for boys like Danny and girls like Peggy, growing up, in safety."

She was kissing him, and whispering, "You forgot my gift, Mike. But I'm taking that myself. I want you, Mike. I want the man who made my children safe. I want to marry him."

Dammit! He made a fine sight for a cold-hearted killer, lyin' here with a woman wipin' tears from his eyes.

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